

AURA

TIDSSKRIFT FOR AKADEMISKE STUDIER AV NYRELIGIØSITET

VOLYM 13 2023

AURA

Aura er et fagfellevurdert «Diamond Open Access» tidsskrift for vitenskapelige artikler om nyreligiøsitet og nye religiøse bevegelser. Aura publiserer vitenskapelige artikler om nyreligiøsitet og nye religionsformer i vår tid, med bidragsyttere fra ulike fagfelt. Vi publiserer artikler både med empiriske undersøkelser og med teoretiske og metodiske analyser, eller en kombinasjon av dette. Artikler skal presentere ny forskning, og må ikke være innsendt til andre tidsskrift. Vi er også interessert i tematisk relevante bokanmeldelser. Alle innsendte bidrag blir vurdert av redaktørene og deretter av to fagfeller.

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VOLYM 13 – 2023

INNHold

Redaksjonelt

Margrethe Løøv, <i>Fra redaksjonen</i>	vii
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Artikler

Tova Olsson, <i>Att förkroppsliga Shakti: En intervjustudie om femininitet i samtida svensk tantra</i>	1
Jonas Otterbeck, <i>For the love of the beloved: Peter Murphy's creative use of Sufi tropes</i>	21
Stian Sivertsen, <i>"Because modern people believe in New Skydaddy": Shifting Buddhist Identities and Authorities on Reddit</i>	47
Christian Stokke & Mira Cataya Rodriguez, <i>Når spiritualitet blir kroppslig: Personer i det norske alternativmiljøet forteller om oppvåkningsopplevelser og psykologisk transformasjon</i>	67

FRA REDAKSJONEN

Aura 2023 er et tematisk åpent nummer, og består av fire artikler. Tova Olsson beskriver hvordan forestillinger om *shakti*, det som i hinduisk kontekst forstås som en feminin, guddommelig kraft, blir fortolket i moderne yoga. Jonas Otterbeck analyserer hvordan rockelegenden Peter Murphy har latt seg inspirere av sufismen for å skape filosofiske, dramatiske og uvanlige sangtekster. Christian Stokke og Mira Cataya Rodriguez studerer personlige erfaringer av åndelig oppvåkning i det norske alternativmiljøet, mens Stian Stiansens artikkel gir et innblikk i hvordan oppfatninger av identitet og autoritet blir endret gjennom (ny)buddhistiske aktørers bruk av internettformet Reddit.

Artiklene representerer en stor bredde når det gjelder hvilke religiøse tradisjoner som er representert, metodevalg og empirisk materiale. Samtidig er det interessant å merke seg noen fellestrekk. Alle artiklene omhandler fenomener som ikke er formelt organiserte, men som primært utøves i private og/eller populærkulturelle kontekster. Artiklene kan også leses i lys av den religionsvitenskapelige vendingen mot *levd religion*, med sitt fokus på materialitet, kroppsliggjøring og diskurs.

Olssons artikkel «Att förkroppsliga shakti» og Stokke og Rodriguez' artikkel «Når spiritualitet blir kroppslig» fokuserer begge på den materielle og kroppslige dimensjonen ved religion. Artiklene gir uttrykk for samtidsspiritualitetens sterke fokus på *kroppen*, samtidig som de reflekterer religionsvitenskapens vending mot den kroppslige og materielle dimensjonen ved religion.

Kjønns- og maktkritiske perspektiver er viktige i den religionsfaglige vendingen mot *levd religion*. Det samme kan sies om store deler av det nyreligiøse feltet. Kritikken av det som oppfattes som «maskuline» perspektiver og patriarkalske tradisjoner preger materialet som Olsson og Stokke/Rodriguez presenterer i dette nummeret. Kjønnsmangfold og maktkritikk er også tydelig til stede i materialet Stian Stiansen presenterer i sin artikkel. Otterbecks artikkel demonstrerer hvordan nye autoriteter tar form i krysningsfeltet mellom nyreligiøsitet og populærkultur. Peter Murphy har ingen formell rolle som religiøs leder, men har likevel en betydelig påvirkningskraft gjennom musikk som når et bredt publikum.

Gjennom søkelyset på materialitet, kroppsliggjøring og nye autoriteter uttrykker artiklene det dynamiske samspillet mellom vitenskap og det nyreligiøse feltet. Vi ser at

vitenskap blir brukt i nyreligiøse aktørers kreative utvikling av nye religiøse forestillinger og praksiser. Nyvinningene som oppstår, beveger seg ofte langt fra det som anerkjennes av de akademiske vitenskapene. Samtidig inspirerer utviklingen på feltet forskere til å vende blikket mot nye aspekter ved religionsutøvelse.

På vegne av redaksjonen

Margrethe Løøv 

ATT FÖRKROPPSLIGA SHAKTI

EN INTERVJUSTUDIE OM FEMININITET I SAMTIDA SVENSK TANTRA

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, contemporary tantra, sometimes referred to as "neo-tantra" has spread substantially throughout Sweden. Emphasizing intimacy and polarity as means to healing and liberation, the movement tends to highlight ideals of "masculine males" and "feminine females", while identifying women with *Shakti* (creativity/immanence) and men with *Shiva* (consciousness/transcendence). This text examines the use of polarity and more precisely notions of femininity within Swedish contemporary tantra, using qualitative interviews. The purpose is to analyse the relationship between tantric femininity/femininities and the agency and subjectivity of female practitioners. The material is construed from a critical feminist theoretical framework, taking its point of departure in the concept of plural and positional femininities as well as Luce Irigaray's "sexual difference" (Irigaray 1994) and Rosi Braidotti's "nondual materialism" (Braidotti 2011). The study suggests that Swedish contemporary tantra in many ways fortifies gender-stereotypical views on femininity while the question of the effects on women's agency and subjectivity is discussed and left open for further research.

KEYWORDS

Tantra – Neotantra – Polarity – Sexuality – Essentialism – Femininity

INLEDNING

I en tid då akademiskt arbete såväl som flertalet samhällseliga debatter söker lösa upp, ifrågasätta och inte sällan kollapsa binära strukturer, kan en könsessentialistisk terminologi som förutsätter ”manligt” och ”kvinnligt” som komplementära motpoler komma att framstå som i bästa fall pinsamt föråldrad, och därutöver som en fientlig verbal boja; en konceptuell låsning som hindrar mänsklig diversitet. Allt fler förstår begrepp och begreppskonstruktion som något som inte bara befäster en verklighet utan faktiskt hjälper till att skapa den (Butler 1993; Braidotti 2003, 2011). Men samtidigt som stora delar av det postmoderna samhället, i en efterkolonial svallvåg av skuld- och självmedvetenhet väger sin terminologi på guldvåg syns klara motrörelser. Den här artikeln handlar om en av dem; den växande våg av terapeutiska tekniker, sensuellt utforskande och spirituell individualism som kallar sig själv tantra.

Kanske bör den tantra som återfinns i Sverige idag bäst betraktas som en homonym till det filosofiska/religiösa system som sprids över stora delar av den asiatiska kontinenten mellan 500 e.kr-1200 e.kr (Samuel 2008; Mallinson och Singleton [red.] 2017; Padoux 2017). Artikeln undviker ändå en förenklad uppdelning mellan så kallad klassisk indisk tantra och västerländsk ”neo-tantra”. Dels eftersom den riskerar att signalera en rörelse av förvanskning och förpassa det ”rena” eller ”autentiska” till filologins finrum. Dels för att den tenderar att helt utesluta de många former av tantra som fortfarande utövas i Indien och andra delar av Asien. I stället förutsätter den en organisk utveckling av en mängd, långt ifrån enhetliga, traditioner genom en form av kontextuell kontinuitet; en formbarhet som svarar på det omgivande samhällets behov och begär, utan att förneka möjligheten till kompletta traditionsbrott där termer och tekniker lånats till helt nya påfund (Urban 2011; Djurdjevic 2014; Albury 2001). Vad som är av intresse för artikeln är uppdelningen mellan maskulint och feminint som återfinns i indiska former av tantra (Dyczkowski 1987; White [red.] 2000; White 2003; Urban 2003) och hur den kommit att förstås och användas i en svensk samtida kontext. I indiska former av tantra sammanbinds det feminina framför allt med skapelsekraft/ kapacitet (*shakti*)¹, materia/natur (*prakrti*) och illusion som förleder eller förblindar (*maya*). Inte sällan är det feminina satt i objektets position; det betraktas, beskrivs och förfrämligas; något som finner sin välbekanta motpart i västerländsk historia (Stone 2007; Laqueur 1994; Kingsley Kent 2012). Men hur beskrivs det feminina av kvinnliga utövare av tantra? Syftet med artikeln är att undersöka just det, som ett led i att börja förstå konstruktionen av femininitet i samtida svensk tantra och dess relation till etablerandet av kvinnlig agens och subjektivitet.

Jag argumenterar för forskningens relevans i ljuset av de senaste årens samhällseliga utveckling, där flertalet feministiska rörelser (däribland #metoo) framvisat hur kulturella

1. Jag skriver sanskrit-begrepp i deras ”västerländska” form, dvs utan diakritiska markeringar, men markerar språkövergång med kursivering.

vanor såväl som hierarkiska och lingvistiska strukturer fungerar hämmande på kvinnors handlings- och rörelseutrymme, både på relationella, artistiska och professionella plan. Nya religiösa rörelser, däribland svensk samtida tantra, tycks hittills relativt oberörd av den kritik som uppstått inom andra samhällsarenor och meriterar en undersökning. Men artikeln erbjuder inte bara en kritik utan framhåller även vikten av att lyfta fram kvinnlig andlig självbeskrivning. För både språkfilosofiskt och sociolingvistiskt sett är hur individer talar, inte minst om sig själva, av avgörande betydelse för deras själv- och världsförståelse. Så viktigt att Alison Stone skriver att vad människor kan tänka är beroende av vilket språk de använder (Stone 2007: 115). Alla de feministiska teoretiker jag använder mig av framhåller att det språkliga uttrycket; kombinationen av röst och blick, är starkt sammankopplad med erfandet av subjektivitet; det vill säga känslan av att vara den underliggande bäraren av egenskaper eller agenten i sitt eget liv.

Inom delar av postmoderna och nymaterialistiska studier har det börjat ses som önskvärt att ge upp den egna subjektiviteten för att kunna ge plats åt en mindre antropocentrisk världsbild (Bräunlein 2016). Det är en ideologiskt intressant riktning, men problematisk i hur den låter bli att relatera till den del av mänskligheten som kanske inte etablerat en verklig subjektivitet att börja med, utan redan upplever en konstant form av existentiell instabilitet. Det tycks rimligt att om kvinnor ska kunna ge upp subjektivitet måste de först erhålla den. Kanske möjliggörs det genom att de "ges" röst, genom att deras berättelser blir synliga (Neitz 2014). Men även genom att de reflekterar över det språk de använder och i vilken sociohistorisk kontext det har sina rötter. Möjligtvis blir det särskilt viktigt i fråga om det religiösa eller ideologiska språket, eftersom det tenderar att vara en så betydelsefull del av det individuella narrativet, kanske till och med det som erbjuder ontologisk grund.

TEORETISK INFALLSVINKEL

Könsessentialism har debatterats under lång tid, inte minst inom feministisk akademisk diskurs. Förenklat spänner perspektiven mellan nivåer av biologisk determinism och mer eller mindre radikal relativism. I den här texten positionerar jag mig inom ramarna för en mjuk relativism genom att bruka begreppen *plurala* och *positionella* kvinnligheter, som Manon Hedenborg White beskriver när hon säger att sociala system kan innehålla "multiple femininities intersected by factors such as race, class and sexuality" (2017: 19). Begreppet sexuell differens lånar jag från Luce Irigaray, som brukar det för att uttrycka en radikal skillnad mellan kvinnor och män, men en skillnad som inte förutsätter en binär opposition där det kvinnliga blir det som saknar i relation till det manliga. Irigarays differens, åtminstone i hennes tidigare publikationer, pekar i stället mot en ännu oskådad kvinnlig subjektivitet, den erbjuder en positiv och rymlig åtskillnad där det kvinnliga får lov att existera i sin egen rätt. Hennes begrepp har adopterats av en mängd feministiska tänkare, däribland Rosi Braidotti. När Braidotti diskuterar Irigaray i sin *Nomadic Subjects* skriver hon att densamma sökt:

to voice and embody in her texts women's own and yet unexplored "feminine", as distinct from the kind of "feminine" that is simply annexed to the logocentric economy as "the second sex" [...] the fact that "the feminine" is the blind spot of all textual and theoretical processes means that women's voices are buried underneath someone else's, man's own words. There is therefore a direct equivalence between the process of metaphorization of "the feminine" and the phenomenon of the historical oppression of women [...] The "feminine" she is after is a woman-defined-feminine, and, as such, it is still a blank; it is not yet there (2011: 94).

Enligt Braidotti har konceptet differens eller åtskillnad, förgiftats av hierarkiska strukturer, där annorlunda kommit att betyda mindre värd, och behöver återtas och nyskapas (2011: 19). Hon menar vidare att:

The feminism of sexual difference argues that women have borne, both materially and symbolically, the cost of the masculine privilege for autonomous self-definition: they have been physically and symbolically dispossessed of a place from where to speak (Braidotti 2011: 97).

På liknande vis skriver Irigaray att den patriarkala civilisationen har placerat kvinnor i objektposition, och att de måste "learn to become subjects capable of speech" (1994: 30). Utöver att Braidotti och Irigaray binder samman subjektivitet och förmågan till språkligt uttryck framhåller de båda att kvinnlig subjektivitet är oskiljaktig från kvinnligt förkroppsligandet, något som fått dem att skapa teorier som söker uppvärdera det fysiska tillsammans med det kvinnliga (Braidotti 2011: 24–25).

Ett liknande uppvärderande av det kroppsliga sker inom den växande religiositet eller andlighet, som forskare kallat livsbejakande, vardaglig, upplevelseorienterad, individuell och subjektiv (Hanegraaff 2003; Heelas 2003; Heelas och Woodhead [red.] 2005; Woodhead 2003) eller en kvinnodominerad nyandlighet som kan betraktas som ett uttryck för vad som tidigare kallats "folkreligion" eller "levd religion" (Fedele och Knibbe [red.] 2013: 4). Inom samtida svensk yoga och tantra, där en klar majoritet är kvinnor, talas det återkommande om en förståelse som kommer genom kroppen; en somatisk kunskap, samt ett återvändande till feminin visdom (så kallad "womb wisdom").

Nina Björk argumenterar i *Under det rosa täcket* (2018) för att bilden av kvinnan som kroppslig varelse är en kulturell konstruktion, med syfte att cementera en naturbunden och ursprunglig kvinnlighet med essentiella egenskaper. Den går hand i hand med biologisk determinism (och särarts- eller livmodersfeminism) som haft dåligt rykte inom feministisk teori, då den tenderar att naturliggöra de fenomen som disciplinen sökt avlägsna, såsom undergivenhet, sexualisering, objektifiering och medgörlighet (Hedenborg White 2017: 61). Feministiska teoretiker har även framhållit att standardiserad normativ kvinnlighet, eller tanken på naturlig kvinnlighet, ersatt och fyller samma funktion som de sociala institutioner som tidigare styrde och störde kvinnors autonomi; att

den disciplinerar, försvagar och hindrar kvinnors fria rörelse, både socialt och fysiskt (Young 1980).

POLITISK OCH REALISTISK ESSENTIALISM

Alison Stone, som brottats en del med Luce Irigarays differensteori menar att Irigaray i sitt tidiga författarskap brukade en *politisk essentialism* (även kallad *mimesis* eller *strategisk essentialism*) det vill säga en essentialism som tjänar ett politiskt syfte (i det här fallet kvinnlig befrielse) men att hon i sitt senare författarskap har övergett den för en *realistisk essentialism* (även kallad *ontologisk essentialism*) vars syfte är just att uppvärdera det feminina tillsammans med det materiella (Stone 2006: 25–44). Skiftet tycks ha föregåtts av en insikt om hur den strategiska/politiska essentialismen bara är brukbar till en viss gräns, samt hur den uppmanar till en övertro på socialkonstruktivism, eller att allt är öppet för kulturell transformation. Irigaray belyser därmed problematiken i den binära oppositionen mellan kultur och natur och hur den försträmda erhållit en så överlägsen position att tanken på konstruktion och människan som kulturell varelse kommit att dominera hela genusdebatten (se Butler 1993). Samtidigt har den mogna Irigarays realistiska essentialism uppfattats som problematisk, inte minst för dess heteronormativa tendens att se skillnaden mellan könen som den skillnad som föregår alla andra skillnader mellan alla andra grupper i samhället (Moi 1999; Stone 2006: 44–49). Vad Stone, som framför allt intresserar sig för västerländsk filosofi inte tar upp i sin analys av Irigaray, är att densamma är en utövare av yoga och tantra och delvis bör förstås som sådan (Irigaray 2002: 49). Det betyder att hon, åtminstone i sina senare verk, kanske bäst läses inte bara som en del av sin västerländska filosofiska och psykologiska kontext, utan även i ljuset av österländsk filosofisk tradition. Morny Joy lyfter fram just det, när hon skriver:

In order to comprehend fully the complexity and significance of Irigaray's work, I believe these dimensions of her religious and spiritual orientation have to be addressed [...] it becomes apparent that the more spiritual Irigaray becomes, as with her adaptation of eastern religious practices, particular yoga and meditation, the more conservative are her views (Joy 2006: 4).

Joy menar att den sena Irigaray kan kritiserar för att vara både spirituellt apologetisk, orientalistisk och essentialistisk och jämför Irigarays användande av ordet "spirituality" med hur "new age practitioners" nyttjar det (Joy 2006: 124–125). Joy menar vidare att Irigarays senare texter, såsom *I Love to You* (1996) och *Between East and West* (2002) riskerar att "simply reinforce rather than reform the existing polarities between women and men" (Joy 2006: 140).

Lynne Huffer (2011) har däremot argumenterat för att vi måste ta Irigaray på allvar när hon skriver att hennes position aldrig förändrats och att det är ett misstag att tro något

annat (se även Roberts 2015). Men i ljuset av både Stones och Joys argument anser jag att det verkligen fruktbara vore att kombinera Irigarays tankar om hur, inte bara kulturen, utan även naturen (som en process av kontinuerligt växande) omger och formar våra kroppar med Judith Butlers tankar på olikhet/pluralitet bland kvinnor (och män) och densammas kritik av tillbakahållande dualistiska genusnormer. Rosi Braidotti tycks förkroppsliga en sådan teoretisk förening mellan det visionära och uppbyggande i Irigarays resonemang och det dekonstruerande och avtäckande i Butlers, när hon skriver:

In my view, the common denominator for the posthuman condition is an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself [...] the binary opposition between the given and the constructed, is currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction (Braidotti 2013: 2–3).

Braidotti kallar den posthumanistiska överbryggningen mellan natur/kultur för icke-dualistisk, vilket beskriver hur den omförhandlar, inkluderar och arbetar mot mer horisontella och relationella strukturer. Den icke-dualistiska visionen rymmer en brist på hierarki som Irigaray inte fullt resonerar med (Stone 2006: 92). Men de två teoretikerna gör gemensam sak i att skriva fram det materiella som hållandes egen agens, självständighet och rörlighet, väl medvetna om att när de förnekar bilden av naturen som passiv mottagare, sätter de även bilden av det feminina i gungning. I omskrivningen av naturen som kreativ, inte bara reproduktiv, ligger ett löfte om kvinnor som inte endast mödrar, utan skapare av vad som än föds fram ur deras vision/begär.

METOD, MATERIAL OCH ETIK

Eftersom texten eftersöker kvinnors röster, beskrivningar och benämningar valdes kvalitativa intervjuer som metod. Davidsson Bremborg (Davidsson Bremborg 2014) menar att den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun erbjuder intervjupersoner ett sätt att berätta sin historia på sitt vis och är speciellt lämplig för att utforska världsbilder och meningsskapande. Forskningsintervjun kan förstås som en skapandeprocess, där den data som produceras i mötet mellan forskare och intervjuperson uppstår dem emellan, som ett slags kreativ och relationell handling. Det är det samskapandet som intresserat mig, även om jag också ser dess problematik. Sedan 1970- och 80-talets reflexiva vändning är det generellt underförstått inom kvalitativ forskning att kunskapsproduktion utformas genom forskarens position, det vill säga att frågor formuleras från ett specifikt utgångsläge och att forskaren tolkar data från en viss vy (Haraway 1988). Forskningsintervjun rymmer således även uppenbara risker för makt-asymmetri och styrning mot ett visst forskningsresultat (Davidsson Bremborg 2014; Kvale och Brinkmann 2014). Jag väljer därför att klargöra min egen position som ett led i att öka transparensen i min forskning.

I mycket sammanfaller min sociala position i fråga om kön, utbildning, etnicitet och samhällsklass med den jag intervjuat, vilket kan ha föranlett en mer egalitär position.

Jag är även själv utövare av yoga och tantra, om än i mer ”klassiska” former. Jag är högst medveten om att min dubbla position som insider (eller relativ outsider) och forskare påverkat intervjuerna men ser den inte som en nackdel eller ett undantag från en fast forskningsnorm, utan snarare en variation. Den dubbla positionen kan dessutom ha erbjudit en intervjusituation som uppfattats som tryggare för intervjupersonerna, då den delvis upphäver makt-asymmetrin mellan (manlig) forskare- (kvinnlig) utövare, samt ifrågasätter den binära oppositionen dem emellan (Jensen 2011; Kripal 2017; McCutcheon [red.] 2014; Mostowlansky och Rota 2016). Jag utgår som sagt ifrån att kunskap inte är något självständigt som kan samlas in för rapportering, såsom det klassiskt positivistiska förhållningssättet förutsätter, utan något som kontinuerligt konstrueras i relation människor emellan, genom berättelse och framställning/identitetsskapelse/bekräftelse. Samtalet är därmed alltid ett unikt, kontextuellt sådant, vilket inte röjer dess validitet men stärker dess narrativa kvalitet.

Innan de längre intervjuerna hade jag e-postkontakt med och genomförde kortare samtal med individer som är aktiva inom den svenska tantra-scenen. Intervjupersonerna valdes sedan, dels genom rekommendationer av människorna jag varit i kontakt med i nämnda samtal, dels efter google-sökningar på ”tantra i Sverige”. Urvalet begränsades slutligen till en grupp på fyra kvinnor som alla uppvisade relativ olikhet i ålder och traditionstillhörighet. Redan i mitt e-postmeddelande var jag tydlig med vad jag forskade kring (polaritet/könsessentialism i svensk tantra) vilket troligen gjorde att kvinnor som var ”vänligt” inställda till feministisk diskurs och som själva kände nyfikenhet kring ämnet valde att delta.

Jag sökte en relativt informell intervjusituation, med ett tydligt syfte utan att ha en lika tydlig riktning, för att möjliggöra ett öppet samtal och motverka styrning. Intervjuerna genomfördes på telefon och tog mellan 45 och 90 min. Intervjuguiden användes som ett slags checklista. I vissa fall tycktes intervjupersonerna anpassa sina svar efter mig, vilket aktualiserar frågor kring forskarens eget avtryck på forskningsfältet (Hedenborg White 2017: 92). Efter att varje intervju utvärderade jag den för att se om intervjuguiden fortfarande var relevant eller behövde omarbetas, samt skrev rent och förtydligade mina anteckningar. Jag noterade även mina egna känsloreaktioner under samtalets gång och i dess efterdyningar, samt vilken typ av dynamik som uppstått mellan mig och intervjupersonen och hur den påverkat samtalet. Samtliga intervjupersoner ville läsa den färdiga uppsatsen, som jag senare delgav dem. Min förhoppning var att de skulle finna den stimulerande och i de fall då den upplevdes som provocerande, att min forskning fortfarande skulle fungera fördelaktigt för framtida studier och samtal genom att den håller en respektfull ton och yrkar på värdet i den individuella berättelsen. Trots att gensvaret efter läsningen var i huvudsak positivt och ingen av intervjupersonerna ursprungligen önskade vara anonym har jag ändå valt att anonymisera dem, med hänsyn till akademisk forskningsetik. I artikeln är därför de fyra intervjupersonernas personliga berättelser i

princip frånvarande, vilket har kostat texten en del narrativt djup men i gengäld gett personlig integritet.

INTERVJUER

SIV

Min första intervjuperson, som jag kallar Siv, introducerades till tantra dels genom Osho-samfundet, dels genom shamanism, dels genom vad hon kallas en mer traditionell vedisk ingång. Siv var mindre villig att berätta om detaljer i sin undervisning och använde sig av ett suggestivt, ofta svårtolkat språk. Hennes del är därmed kortare än de övrigas, men inte mindre relevant.

När jag frågar Siv om polaritet svarar hon att kvinnor är "earth-beings" och män "sun-beings", att "är man inkarnerad i en kvinnlig kropp så har man valt det, det är inte ett misstag. Då gäller det att aktualisera det feminina och tända upp det maskulina". När jag ber Siv att beskriva det kvinnliga talar hon om receptivitet och den "framfödande principen", samt "förmågan att ta emot den maskulina kraften".² Mannen, menar hon, måste i stället aktualisera den manliga principen genom riktad handling ("action that grows corn") och hålla "en medvetenhet om hur man befruktar". Män måste förstå vad handlingar får för konsekvenser, och lära sig genom dem. Kvinnor, menar hon, har i stället tillgång till intuition genom sin livmoder ("womb-presence"), som hon även associerar med kreativitet och "magnetism". Hon anser att kvinnors kroppar behöver en "spirit-connection" mer än adrenalinkickar och att de därför i högre grad än män tröttnas ut av hastigheten i dagens samhälle. Hon beskriver den feminina, andliga vägen som att "känna, vara sexuell, gräva i jorden" och den manliga, andliga vägen som fokuserad på meditation och transcendens. Siv anser att det senaste årtiondets explosion av intresse för tantra är ett "uttryck för människosjälens längtan att läka sig i den sexuella aspekten- att komma närmare andra".

KARIN

Min andra intervjuperson, som jag kallar Karin, kom först i kontakt med tantra genom en vän som höll kurser i ämnet. Med tiden utbildade hon sig till Sexsibility Coach och när jag frågar henne hur hon definierar tantra svarar hon: "tantra betyder livets väv, att vara närvarande i det som är nu, i livets alla skeden." När jag frågar Karin om könsroller och polaritet svarar hon att hennes grupper alltid arbetar med könsneutrala övningar. Samtidigt beskriver hon hur män som anmäler sig till kurser och workshops "förväntar sig att kvinnor ska vara tillgängliga" och att de sällan går med på att göra parövningarna

2. På en av Sveriges största nyandliga kursgårdars hemsida citerades hon vid tiden för intervjun "the role of every woman is to birth the God in every man."

med en annan man. Kvinnor, framför allt unga sådana, kommer däremot ofta till kurserna tillsammans med en samkönad vän och känner större trygghet i att arbeta med varandra. Karin beskriver dem som ”flickor som vill veta hur mycket de själva behöver göra för att få vara med” och att hon låter dem veta att ”ditt bästa bidrag till gruppen är att lyssna till dig själv”. Kvinnor ringer även oftare innan kursen och frågar om övningarna samt om de kommer att behöva klä av sig, vilket män sällan eller aldrig gör. Männen, säger Karin, är ”modigare”.

När jag fortsätter fråga kring manligt och kvinnligt, svarar Karin att alla människor har ”allting i sig, både det aktiva och det passiva” och att det finns ”kvinnor som är väldigt maskulina- ’på’ och män som är väldigt feminina- mjuka”. Hon skyndar sig sedan att tillägga att män inte tycker om att höra att de har kvinnliga kvalitéer. Karin beskriver parövningarna som könsneutrala men menar att de kan tjäna till att stärka mannen och kvinnans roll, något hon säger behövs och bör befastas och bekräftas, samtidigt som hon inte vill utesluta att de kan fungera begränsande. Efter en stund säger hon att traditionella könsroller ger en grundtrygghet och gör en jämförelse med hur ett barn som tillåts springa vind för våg inte mår bra.

Är man trygg kan man testa andra saker, exempelvis byta sysslor. Men är man strikt tantrisk så ger kvinnan alltid med hjärtat och tar emot med könet [exempelvis andning, min anmärkning] och mannen tvärtom. Jag tror att den polariteten behövs men att den samtidigt stänger ute väldigt många människor. Så jag vill hålla öppet och ge möjlighet, inte förutsätta att jag vet vad som fungerar och inte fungerar. Om man är för mycket uppe i huvudet och vill ha logiska förklaringar på allt blir det lätt att låsa sig och bli för fyrkantig. När du är i kroppen kan du uppleva vad som funkar, utan åsikter.

Vid frågan om vad kvinnlighet är svarar Karin att det innebär att vara ”följsam, mjuk, lyssnande, kännande, närvarande”. Men en stund senare säger hon att hon faktiskt inte vet vad som gör män till män och kvinnor till kvinnor. Hon säger även att hon ”aldrig känt sig bekväm med någon kvinna” eftersom hon inte ”varit så liten och nätt” och inte varit det ”som män tycker är kvinnligt”. I stället har hon ”slappnat av tillsammans med män” eftersom ”kvinnor dömer och har mycket mer åsikter om andra och negativa åsikter om sig själva”.

ADRIANA

Min tredje intervjuperson, som jag kallar Adriana kom först i kontakt med tantra genom den yogaskola hon fortfarande, 29 år senare, tillhör. Hon förstår tantra som en del av traditionell yoga och ett ”oerhört komplicerat system, en vetenskap för personlig utveckling”.

När jag frågar Adriana om polaritet svarar hon att det inte bara handlar om man och kvinna, utan grundläggande kosmiska principer, som inte längre återfinns i utbildning

och uppfostran men som borde återbördas dit. Hon säger: ”Jag vet att det kommer att låta som en stereotyp, nu när kvinnorna har startat feministiska rörelser och efter metoo” men att människor ”missförstår vad det innebär att vara kvinna”. Adriana säger att män och kvinnor är kompletterande och inte bör leva i ett ”löjligt tävlingstillstånd om vem som är starkast”. Hon menar vidare att: ”Kvinnor och män har en felbild. Man tror att en kvinna behöver två kilo makeup för att vara sexig” men att det egentligen handlar om att ”man trivs med sig själv och inte har sexuella hämningar”. Kvinnor försöker förgäves efterlikna fotomodeller, menar Adriana, utan att lyckas ”omfamna kvinnligheten”. När jag frågar henne vad den består av svarar hon:

En harmonisk karaktär som människa. Bra vitalitet, ingen anorexia, erotisk, inga sexuella hämningar, starkt självförtroende, kärleksfull, medkänslig, empatisk, ömhet, tillgivenhet, intuition, en stor förmåga för uppoffring (av egot), förmåga att minska sin själviskhet, stor förmåga att älska, omhändertagande. Allt det sitter bättre på en kvinna. En förmåga att överlämna sig, förfining, sötma i sitt sätt att vara, stor styrka på insidan men på utsidan mjuk och graciös.

När jag frågar henne vad manligheten består av svarar hon:

Beslutsamhet, mod, vertikalitet, kompromisslöshet, att hålla fast vid moraliska principer oavsett hur svårt det blir för honom [...] Det betyder inte att han blir rigid, utan att han använder sunt förnuft.

Adriana menar att hur en person ger uttryck för egenskaperna är vad som utgör skillnaden. Den ska ”sitta i ryggraden”. Kvinnan ska ”vara mjukare, omfamnande, sträva efter harmoni” medan ”mannen ska ha ryggen rak”. Adriana säger att ”i Shaktis natur ligger att hon täcker över områden där det fattas någonting” och att kvinnor därför ”har börjat ta över mannens roll på grund av vissa mäns mjukhet”. Hon säger att ”om vi byter roller under lång tid leder det till missnöje och drama” men att det kan undvikas om kvinnor och män tillämpar och förstår polaritet. Adriana menar vidare att tillämpad polaritet och ömsesidig kärlek tillåter individer att släppa sina ägandebehov i intima relationer, att se ”att den andre har egen vilja, egna tankar”. När jag frågar hur hon förstår Shiva och Shakti eller det maskulina och det feminina som inre principer som förenas i varje enskild individ, svarar hon att det är viktigt att kultivera båda aspekterna av polariteten inombords, för att få tillgång ”till den mjuka sidan när det behövs och den bestämda när det behövs”. I hennes praktik tar det uttryck genom att hon mediterar för Shiva på morgonen och för Shakti på kvällen. Hon säger:

Det maskulina är medvetandeprincipen. Det är överblicksprincipen, som aldrig tappar fokus och centrering. Den kan alltid hålla riktning och har fokus på ändamålet. Det kvinnliga kan ge uttryck för vilka känslor som helst.

När jag frågar Adriana hur hon tror att undervisning om polaritet påverkar hennes elever svarar hon att det påverkar dem positivt. Att de blir lyckligare och mer harmoniska och får "våldigt fina förändringar på arbetsplatsen och för sig själva. I familjelivet ger det större harmoni, större samspel". Att skapa harmoni menar hon är framför allt det kvinnligas/kvinnornas uppgift, "även de som är i chefsroller och måste se till att saker och ting blir gjorda men att harmonin kvarstår". Männen å sin sida "tar mer ansvar, mer initiativ och uppskattar mer vad kvinnorna gör i hemmet". När jag frågar hur principerna undervisas rent konkret betonar hon att det är viktigt att "inte göra cirkus av tantran". I hennes skola undervisar man par att praktisera yogaställningar tillsammans. Hon säger att det inte krävs att deltagarna tar av sig kläderna utan att det viktiga är de "psykologiska aspekterna av polariteten, det vill säga de grundläggande behov som män och kvinnor har." Hon säger:

Mäns emotionella behov är uppmuntran, godkännande, beundran, tillit till honom, att bli accepterad, uppskattad. För kvinnor är det omhändertagande, att bli förstådd, respekt, hängivenhet, erkännande, försäkran. Mäns värderingar handlar om power, kompetens, autonomi, achievement, effektivitet, syfte, framgång. För kvinnor handlar de om kärlek, kommunikation, förhållanden, känslor, känslighet och harmoni, förmågan att ta hand om andra, att hjälpa varandra, samhörighet och utbildning.

JYOTI

Min fjärde intervjuperson, som jag kallar Jyoti, hörde först talas om tantra genom Osho i Puna, Indien under 80-talet. Hon var aktiv i samfundet under många år och har därefter använt sig av utbildningarna hon gick i Puna för att hålla tantrakurser i Sverige. Hon beskriver tantra som ett "otroligt fint sätt att mötas, som påverkar hela livet. Som gör att jag kan slappna av och ta det som det kommer, utan att forcera".

I Puna var det mycket prat om manligt och kvinnligt i tantran, berättar Jyoti. I sin tidiga undervisning talade hon därför mycket om män och kvinnor. Men idag säger hon istället: "vänd dig till din partner" när hon undervisar parövningar. Hon säger att hon försöker komma ifrån att tala om manligt och kvinnligt och polaritet men att hon samtidigt tycker att "det är synd, det finns mycket spännande där. De krafterna, de energierna som dras ihop. Vi är gjorda för det här. Den fysiska kroppen är gjord för det här".

Jyoti berättar att deltagare i de könsblandade grupperna ibland blir aggressiva och skriver e-mail om hon inte talar könsneutralt. Hon känner att hon vill och behöver inkludera dem men om "jag har en par-kurs och det inte finns något lesbiskt par, då använder jag mer klassisk terminologi". När jag frågar hur länge hon tagit den här typen av hänsyn säger hon att det är under de senaste fem åren som hon funnit att hon måste tänka på vad hon säger, vilket får en del kolleger att säga att hon sysslar med "snäll-tantra".

Det är mycket övningar som jag inte gör nu för att många inte skulle gilla det. Men jag saknar att inte kunna leka med de krafterna. Det börjar bli förbjudet, efter metoo. Vilket är jättebra såklart. Men det hittar säkert tillbaka. Nu är många så rädda att göra fel, att vara för intim. Men jag kan tänka mig att den kommer tillbaka. Det finns en naturlig kraft i polariteten och det är härligt när den levs ut på ett naturligt vis. Alltså den sexuella attraktionen. När det manliga och det kvinnliga finner varandra så finns det en avslappning i det.

ANALYS: DET KVINNLIGA BESKRIVET AV KVINNOR

Materialet är alltför litet för att erbjuda några klara slutsatser, men tycks ändå peka mot att svensk samtida tantra rymmer en komplex uppsättning föreställningar om polaritet och det kvinnligas plats i densamma. Vad jag utläser ur intervjuerna är att kvinnornas skildring av det kvinnliga inte är en självbeskrivning. Självet; subjektet, tycks helt enkelt inte få plats inom objektifieringens ramar. Ett exempel på det är Karins beskrivning av det kvinnliga som mjukt och följsamt, samtidigt som hon säger att hon ”aldrig känt sig bekväm med någon kvinna” eftersom hon inte ”varit så liten och nätt” och inte varit det ”som män tycker är kvinnligt”. Eller hur Jyoti kan känna att hon har ”ett driv” som tycks egga henne ut ur det binära tvåkönssystemets trånga rum, åtminstone den del av rummet hon borde hålla sig i. Deras upplevelse leder tanken till hur Butler skriver att ”gender is a norm that can never be fully internalized” (Butler 2017: 186) eftersom den är fantasmatisk; omöjlig att förkroppsliga. Det kvinnliga i intervjupersonernas berättelser skildras som receptivt, (Siv, Karin, Adriana, Jyoti), intuitivt (Siv, Adriana) omhändertagande (Karin, Adriana) och uppoffrande (Adriana). Till och med den mest fulländade kvinnlighet framstår här som ett tillstånd av brist, eftersom den förutsätter en motsatsrelation (polaritet) snarare än pluralitet, variation eller likhet. Även när intervjupersonerna talar om vikten av att kultivera andlig androgynism eller att ”byta roller” i övningarna de utför, är det alltid en fråga om att kombinera och sammanföra motpoler på ett kompletterande, tillfredställande eller genererande vis. Det kvinnliga tycks aldrig existera som sin egen utan alltid, som Irigaray menar i sin kritik, i relation till det maskulinas självförståelse.

Att avgöra huruvida den roll det ”feminina” ges i den svenska tantriska polariteten stärker individuell kvinnlig kreativitet, agens eller subjektivitet kräver vidare studier. Speciellt med hänvisning till Saba Mahmoods (2011) argumentation kring hur kvinnlig, religiös fromhet och ett accepterande av konventionella könsnormer inte nödvändigtvis sammanfaller med brist på agens (se även Palmer 1993; Rountree 1999). Butler menar att könsidentiteten är performativ; att den består av en upprepning av stilerade handlingar, som när den avtäcks som sådan ger en upplevelse av grundlöshet eller brist på kontinuitet (Butler 2017). Vad den tantriska kvinnligheten verkar erbjuda är former av stabilitet och trygghet. Det som Karin efterfrågar när hon säger att ett barn som bara får

springa vind för våg inte får ro. Eller Siv när hon säger att vi visserligen kan testa att leva utanför könsrollerna men snart påminns om att det är omöjligt. Inte för att strukturerna är så starka, utan för att den egna naturen är så stark. En fast och naturlig könstillhörighet, liksom en fast traditionstillhörighet, tycks kunna frambringa en självklarhet som tillåter att individen står oberörd inför postmoderna och icke-dualistiska begreppskollapser. Men självklarhet och trygghet kan inte sägas sammanfalla med subjektivitet. Lika litet som den ohämmade sexualitet Adriana talar om kan kallas synonym med frigjordhet.

En av de mest inflytelserika personerna på den svenska samtida tantra-scenen, Johan Ekenberg, skriver: ”Tänk om kvinnorörelsen ägnade mindre kraft åt att bekriega mannen och mer tid åt att hitta sin egen urkraft genom sexuell frigörelse” (Ekenberg 2007: 46). Ekenbergs ord rymmer en förväntan på kvinnors mottaglighet och öppenhet, som Karin också vittnar om. Vilket väcker vidare frågor om huruvida det är kvinnors icke-diskriminerande, kravlösa tillgänglighet som efterfrågas, snarare än deras fria sexualitet? Speciellt i vetskap om att en av grundpelarna i svensk samtida tantra är just att du kan bli tilldelad vilken partner som helst i utförandet av intima övningar (Åkerbäck 2018).

På 1890-talet skrev Richard von Krafft-Ebing att ”mentalt normalutvecklade och väluppföstrade” kvinnor hade liten könsdrift. Han ansåg även att kvinnans förmodade sexuella passivitet (en symbol för hennes passivitet i det offentliga livet) var inbyggd i hennes sexuella konstitution (Laqueur 1994: 269). Det intressanta i sammanhanget är att kvinnans bristande könsdrift skrevs fram efter att kvinnor under hundratals år i stället sammanknippats med köttslighet, lust och oförmåga till fysisk kontroll. Kvinnans sexualitet tycks helt enkelt vara bunden till mannens behov. Och den är alltid ett kollektivt ärende.

Utan att förutsätta att det alltid är fallet tyder intervjuerna på att den kvinnliga agens som uppmuntras, tillåts eller stärks inom svensk samtida tantra har en viss form. Den är sensuell, ohämmad och intuitiv. Inte tjurig, okåt och intellektuell. Den framträder genom en konstruktiv kreativitet som harmoniserar, som alltid är positionell; alltid i relation till. Inte som en destruktiv kraft som ifrågasätter, bryter ner eller stänger ute. Ändå menar Adriana att ”det feminina kan ge uttryck för vilka känslor som helst” vilket tycks peka mot en möjlighet till plurala eller rörliga kvinnligheter inom rörelsen. Jag frågar mig även om dess tonvikt vid polaritet kan förstås som en form av realistisk essentialism, sedd utifrån Irigarays teori om sexuell differens.

ATT FÖRKROPPSLIGA SHAKTI- EN REALISTISK ESSENTIALISM?

Alison Stone kallar Irigaray en ”anti-essentialistisk essentialist”, eftersom hon både förespråkar en naturlig dualism och samtidigt förnekar någontings beständighet. För Irigaray är den materiella verkligheten nämligen flytande och evigt föränderlig (Stone 2006: 45, 98). Men det innebär inte att hon förnekar naturligt förekommande former, utan att hon medvetet väljer en ”feminin” vinkling i sin teori. Irigaray menar nämligen att den maskulina, filosofiska traditionen har sammanlänkat vätskor med kvinnokroppen och förstått

dem båda som gränslösa, besvärande och förorenande (Stone 2006: 98). För henne innebär alltså essentialism, eller tanken på stabila egenskaper, att reproducera bilder som prefererar den manliga kroppen, eller den patriarkala idén om den manliga kroppen, som just stabil och pålitlig. Irigaray menar även att den som förnekar skillnader mellan män och kvinnor förnekar den kvinnliga rytms existensrätt och att kvinnor far illa av att den manliga rytmen är den som prefereras, eller kanske den enda som erkänns, i det västerländska samhället (Irigaray 1994: 62). Hon skriver vidare att de rättigheter kvinnor har uppnått under de senaste åren mestadels är rättigheter som tillåter dem att "slip into men's skin, to take on the so called male identity" (Irigaray 1994: 79), det vill säga att kvinnor förlorar sin specifika kvinnliga identitet i jakten på jämlikhet eller relativ framgång. Irigaray beskriver också kvinnor som "fertile and nurturing [...] to them, nature is a preferred environment; the ever-fertile earth is their place" (Irigaray 1994: 111).

I det stora hela känns hennes resonemang igen från så kallad "gudinnefeminism" (se Starhawk 1979; Sjöo och Mor 1987; Rountree 1999; Hildebeitel och Erndl [red.] 2000).³ Det återspeglas även i Sivs beskrivning av kvinnor som "earth-beings", vars konstitution inte förmår hantera ständiga adrenalinpåslag på samma sätt som mäns gör. Utifrån likheterna mellan Irigarays senare tankar och de som återfinns i samtida tantra, kan rörelsen (som är allt annat än enhetlig) kanske förstås som en form av realistisk essentialism, som söker uppvärdera det materiella tillsammans med det kvinnliga och använda sig av polaritet för att uppnå en "jämlik olikhet" eller positiv åtskillnad. Stone skriver:

Insofar as Irigaray can conclude that women have naturally different characters to men, she can argue that cultural transformation is necessary to bring women's bodies at a level of expression and "spiritualisation" equivalent to that available to men. Overcoming its current exclusiveness, western culture must start providing forms through which each woman can open out her female body, give it forms, words, knowledge of itself. Irigaray stresses, for example, that work is presently organised exclusively around the distinctive temporal rhythm characteristic of male bodies, a situation which inflicts distress and discomfort upon women, and which must be remedied (Stone 2006: 44).

3. "We must not forget that in the time of women's law, the divine and the human were not separate. That means religion was not a distinct domain. What was human was divine and became divine. Moreover, the divine was always related to nature [...] In a patriarchal regime, religion is expressed through rites of *sacrifice* and *atonement*. In women's history, religion is entangled with cultivation of the earth, of the body, of life, of peace [...] patriarchy stripped women of divinity, taking it over in places where men are amongst themselves, and often suspecting women's religion of devilry" (Irigaray 1994: 10–11). Det är svårt att urskilja om Irigaray här sysslar med en form av narrativ mimesis, att hon skriver fram en berättelse om kvinnor som hon tror kan fungera expanderande för dem, eller om hon talar om en historisk verklighet.

Skillnaden mellan Irigarays realistiska essentialism och det informanterna ger uttryck för ligger kanske främst i deras tilltro till just stabila egenskaper, eller essentiella kvinnliga och manliga särdrag. Men deras åsikter och erfarenheter måste också förstås som återspeglningar av deras (manliga) lärares (se Shay och Bogdan 2014), snarare än försök att skapa den kvinnodefinierade kvinnlighet som Irigaray och Braidotti efterfrågar.

SLUTDISKUSSION: MOT PLURALA KVINNLIGHETER I SAMTIDA SVENSK TANTRA

Stone skriver att varje legitim kultur som framhåller sexuell differens måste vara av en självkritisk sort, som tillåter uttrycket av vår inneboende flerformighet (Stone 2006: 9). Det är med en sådan självkritisk hållning och öppenhet för plurala uttryck, som jag låtit Irigaray tala om kvinnor och kvinnlighet i anknytning till natur/kroppslighet/materialitet utan att reducera dem till samma anknytning. Det är med samma hållning som jag belyser och ifrågasätter utrymmet för kvinnlig agens och subjektivitet som ges i samtida svensk tantra, utan att för den skull glömma att vad som utgör en stärkande diskurs för en grupp kvinnor kan innebära motsatsen för en annan (Knibbe 2013: 189).

Det krävs en vaksam blick för att inte bidra till ytterligare en vag eller essentialistisk beskrivning av femininitet. Samtidigt tror jag att en kvinnlig identitet måste sökas, men antagligen utanför de platser vi tidigare letat på. Om inte riskerar den att förbli vad Braidotti kallar "the Other of the Same" (Braidotti 2011: 96) eller att gå förlorad i en falsk neutralitet som inte är något annat än det maskulinas extra utrymme. En kvinnlig identitet som förmår rymma plurala kvinnligheter kräver rörlighet, utan att regrediera till att förstås som instabil, oförutsägbar eller lynnig. En form av rörlighet som går bortom Irigarays förståelse av "fluidity" men som återfinns i Braidottis beskrivning av *Nomadic Subjects* (2011). Med stöd av den kan kanske Irigarays differens-begrepp behålla relevans, men infogas i en mindre dualistisk hållning som inte räds förvirringen av lösare identiteter.

Är svensk samtida tantra en möjlig grogrund för en rörlig kvinnlig identitet eller plurala kvinnligheter? Att ge ett enkelt svar på den frågan är att reducera komplexiteten med vilken kvinnor engagerar sig i nyandlig praxis. Visserligen förhåller sig mina intervjupersoner till fasta former av kvinnlighet i polär och binär opposition till kanske ännu fastare former av manlighet. Samtidigt rymmer scenen en uppsjö olika sätt att praktisera tantra, som många kvinnor verkar finna stärkande och stöttande och som de menar hjälper dem att sätta gränser, samtidigt som de tillåts utforska sin sexualitet och kreativitet. Som Anna Fedele och Kim E. Knibbe skrivit kan de könsroller som konstrueras inom samtida andlighet stärka kvinnor, men de kan även återskapa eller nyskapa könsstereotyper och könad dominans (Fedele och Knibbe [red.] 2013: 5). Det tycks därför fortsatt nödvändigt att kvinnor finner utrymme, inom och utom sig själva, att som Stone uttrycker det; öppna sin kvinnliga kropp och ge den form, ord, kunskap om sig själv.

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FOR THE LOVE OF THE BELOVED

PETER MURPHY’S CREATIVE USE OF SUFI TROPES

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ABSTRACT

Rock artist Peter Murphy (Bauhaus, Dali’s Car, solo) has drawn from Sufism in his lyrics since 1986. Throughout his career Murphy has been open about this but no one has analysed his lyrics before. This article illustrates and discusses how tropes from Sufi genres, such as poetry, hymns and tales, are reused and reformulated in the form of post-punk rock lyrics. Sufi tropes, combined with Murphy’s dramatic rock songs, empower him as a writer and enable him to create unusual, ambiguous, and dramatic lyrics. The songs rarely propagate Sufism; they are not Sufi songs and, indeed, are communicating primarily with an audience that cares little about his Sufi attachment. Nonetheless, by exposing the underlying Sufi frame his lyrics becomes more comprehensible. Murphy’s creatively carves out space for Sufism in a rock sub-culture otherwise known to flirt with nihilism. The article is accompanied by a Spotify playlist called “For the Love of the Beloved.”¹

KEYWORDS

Peter Murphy – Sufism – goth music – Bauhaus – lyrics

PETER MURPHY: GODFATHER OF GOTH AND DEVOUT SUFI

For more than three decades, Peter Murphy – iconic rock legend, solo artist, and singer of cult band Bauhaus – has written highly original lyrics saturated with Sufi tropes. In this case, tropes refer to recurrent motifs in the songs. Sufism is a spiritual tradition originating within Islam with the ultimate goal of teaching people how to align their souls with “the Truth” (with a capital T): that is, with God. Murphy has lived in Turkey since 1992. He is also known as the grand- or godfather of goth, a title he is proud

1. <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1Bhm5kicHL6GF9ZHzzpYYy?si=dd359a18e2f74f93>

of, if somewhat ironic about (Louder than war, web, 2023). Goth music is generally associated with nihilism not with devote Sufism, but as we will see below, Murphy has managed to infuse Sufism into his creative oeuvre yet retaining credibility and status as a alternative rock artist.

Murphy is open about his attachment to Sufism in interviews and on stage as when greeting the audience with “*as-salam alaykum*” on the Bauhaus live album *Gotham* (2002) or when adding “Fuck the Son and Holy Ghost! One god, not three” when initiating “Nerves” on the live album *Peter Murphy Live in London* (2019). His Sufi attachment is even noted on Wikipedia. Yet, I have failed to find scholarly articles addressing this influence on his work. The most insightful comments are found on fan site indigoeyes.info and in some CD liner notes to *Bareboned and Sacred* and *Peter Murphy, 5 albums* by journalist Matt Hanson, who lives in Istanbul, writes on Sufism, among other things, and seems to have known Murphy since 2016. This article explores and interprets Murphy’s lyrics with reference to his biography and to Sufi tropes. The main material consists of the original versions of Murphy’s nine solo studio albums released between 1986–2014. All quoted lyrics are acknowledged to be the intellectual property of Peter Murphy if not otherwise indicated.

Sufism is the collective term used for a wide variety of spiritual practices, poetry and intellectual speculations that originate within Islam. Sufism has wielded, and wields, enormous influence across large areas of the globe (Raudvere and Stenberg 2009). Turkish Islam has been permeated by Sufism for a long time, although Sufis have a troubled relation with the Turkish state. In 1925, Sufi meetings were banned by government decree, forcing Sufi *tekkes* (lodges) to redefine themselves as folkloric troupes or dance companies. Tolerance has fluctuated over time, and currently Sufi meetings are openly held all over Turkey while still remaining banned (Feldman 2022). Sufi poetry, on the other hand, has a high culture status in Turkey. It continues to inspire work by film makers, novelists, performance artists and, not least, musicians. This means that quite a lot of Sufi-inspired art and speculation happens outside of the Sufi orders. Some Sufi inspired artists are not attached to Islam but, when scratching the surface, contacts with orders and Islam often appear. Sufism is, of course, not the only theme in Murphy’s many songs, but it is recurrent and, I would claim, very often part of the lyrics in one way or other. It is the Sufi elements and their embeddedness in rock music that fascinate me and that will be explored in this article.

Murphy frequently writes in a consciously ambiguous way, which is spelt out in the song “Things to Remember” from *Lion* (2014).

Thing to remember
when writing figures of speech and sound
The power of poetry comes from the ability to defy logic
Defy logic often
Use a metaphor and

tell us that your lover is the sky.
When you do that
We won't believe you,
We won't believe you
Because saying so makes no sense
But we'll see a meaning.

The remaining lyrics celebrate the power and blessing of prayer. But even this part touches on Sufism with its allusion to God (the lover in the sky) and the prediction that it will not be understood, although it will make sense for the last “we” of the text. Further, remembrance of God (*dhikr*) is key among Sufis. The title may draw upon that association. I argue that the power of Murphy's lyrics is connected with their ambiguity. With this initial declaration of poetic strategy, Murphy dares us to try to understand, a challenge I hereby accept.

First, I discuss the interpretation of lyrics theoretically. Next, Murphy's biography is sketched with the help of the many interviews available with him in different media channels.² Then the article primarily analyses the lyrics from his, to date, nine solo albums and their ninety-one songs to demonstrate how Murphy recurrently and creatively merges references to Sufi tropes with his work. I start by introducing one very advanced example, then discuss how Murphy developed his relation to Sufism in his lyrics over time.³ Finally, I discuss the originality of his use of these tropes – not least in his choice of words to express the tropes – and the unique expression that results when combining them with the music.

I have strived to corroborate my interpretations by finding parallels and grounding my readings in interviews, Murphy's webpage, material on Sufism and the particular circles in which Murphy has moved in Turkey. I have practiced caution when drawing from journalism, as a great deal of rock journalism is rather formulaic. It is further quite clear from interviews that Murphy enjoys confounding journalists. That said, the foundation of the interpretations below rests on my background as a scholar of Islamic studies with a longstanding professional interest in Sufism and is part of my current research on creativity and Islam among European artists (Otterbeck 2021, 2022, 2023). It is also founded on my lifelong engagement in and love of rock music.

2. I have sifted through some fifty interviews with Murphy.

3. I have also looked at the twelve official music videos of Murphy and listen and looked at many live recordings and video clips of live performances to find clues or cues where Murphy expands on his attachment to Sufism, but to little avail.

APPROACHING THE LYRICS

Above, I used the concept “Sufi tropes”, by which I mean motifs often embedded in metaphors and symbols that in their turn function as metonyms for the tropes for the benefit of the initiated. Sufi tropes are present in the celebrated Sufi poetry and prose tradition seen as high literature in any Muslim setting and at times outside of them. Jalal ud-din Rumi (d. 1273), for example, has an appeal reaching far beyond Muslim circles. Sufi tropes are also present in the *ilahi* tradition (the Turkish Sufi hymns, see Feldman 2022) and in Sufi lore, which has fantastic narratives about past and present Sufi masters and their ability to transcend time and space, but also their uproarious behaviour when challenging local tradition and normativity (Baldick 1989). Sufi poetry and *ilahi* chants are not, in terms of form, far apart, and frequently, as in the oeuvre of Yunus Emre (d. 1328), there is no meaningful difference between poetry and lyrics. There is an abundance of possible Sufi metaphors and tropes. But there are also those that are frequently recurring that form a core which I will focus on. Coincidentally, rock music lyrics are filled with metaphors overlapping with some of the evergreen themes of Sufism like love, pain, loss, longing, and transformation of the self. This provide Murphy with the possibility of expressing himself overtly as a Sufi yet being understood as writing opaque, cool sounding lyrics about love or longing.

Evidently, religious themes in rock music are not unusual. but the music generally draws from Christian or Jewish traditions. There is anti-Muslim rock in Muslim majority countries (Otterbeck et al. 2018) and some Muslim rock musicians express a positive relation to Islam like Indonesian dangdut rock singer and guitarist Rhoma Irama, but more often specifically to Sufism like Pakistani Junoon (LeVine and Otterbeck 2023). Murphy is neither the first UK musician to find Islam or Sufism and make use of it in his art. Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam or Richard Thompson springs to mind, yet, as we shall see, Murphy’s contribution is highly original in its way of processing Sufi tropes into ambiguous lyrics.

In much rock music, the idea of authenticity in lyrics is taken for granted, and artists are often associated with the “I” of the narratives—in many cases, but far from always, with good reason (Brackett 2000). In this article I argue, at the risk of being off the mark, that Murphy writes surprisingly bluntly about his understanding and experience of Sufism. I strive to give priority to the expressed thoughts of Peter Murphy about his lyrics, to curb my interpreter’s enthusiasm. Ideally, my meaning making can be tested against his ambitions or should at least be acceptable. An example when I have restrained my analysis because of biographical details is when analyzing the song “I Spit Roses” from *Ninth* (2011). Lyrics made me think of the connection between roses and both Muhammad and the fragrance of the divine so prominent in Ottoman iconography. Thus, his poetic endeavour would be to spit roses at his audience, that is, spread the holy. However, the verses were hard to interpret as support for this. I found an interview with Murphy who claimed the phrase originated in a specific situation where he attempted

to defuse a quarrel with the rest of Bauhaus by filling his mouth with roses and, instead of making comments, spitting out roses. Bauhaus bass player David J. remarks that it happened in the studio with the band in 2006 (Exberliner 2011; Haskins 2014). It became apparent that the lyrics are a poetic rendering of the conflict. What about insisting on both interpretations? My academic eagerness to find meaning is no guarantee for its being anything other than a possible interpretation so I restrained myself.

TRAVELLING TOWARDS THE FLAME

Peter Murphy was born in 1957 into an Irish Catholic working-class family in Northampton in England. He describes his closest family as having “a very wonderful, sophisticated orientation toward the spiritual aspect [of religion], rather than just the formal, dogmatic thing” (Westworld 2013). In interviews, Murphy portrays life in Northampton as dreary and in a way frightening, something to escape from. Sartorial style, appearance and drama became part of his first way of fleeing the trap of everyday work. Murphy recurrently claims that some of that drama was picked up from Catholic mass, which fascinated him as a youth.

In 1979, he emerged on the music scene as singer in the newly formed band Bauhaus and quickly gained a cult following. After four albums filled with theatrical, poetic, expressionist, beautiful but also funny and tongue-in-cheek music and lyrics, Bauhaus parted company in 1983 and Murphy explored new possibilities that included starting the group Dali’s Car with former Japan bass player Mick Karn (d. 2011).⁴ In 1986, Murphy embarked on a solo career that has established him as an artist of high integrity, but in no way a top-selling act. Yet, among people interested in alternative rock, he is highly respected.

Since his youth, Murphy has had a great interest in the spiritual, and an intellectual curiosity in the history of religions and he has made references to personal spiritual development and searches throughout his career. Some of the early lyrics on Bauhaus’ first album, *In the Flat Field* (1980), draw on spiritual themes, like the references to Catholic ideas in “Stigmata Martyr”. However, tastes and moral limits change over time. According to Bauhaus member David J. Haskins (*)Haskins2014, in later times, when playing some of the early Bauhaus songs, Murphy has modified lyrics he considers against his faith, for example, changing “the pangs of dark delight” to “no more pangs of dark delight” to signal his distance to the hedonism implied.⁵

During the mid-1980s, Murphy found and started to embrace Sufism or, as he would rather put it, the Truth that people in the West tend to call Sufism (Westworld 2013).

4. At the time, only one album was issued, in 1984, but years later a second attempt was made resulting in a five-track EP (2012).

5. Clearly audible on the Bauhaus live album *Gotham* (2002).

Some lyrics on the self-titled album *Dali's Car* (1984), directly address spiritual strivings. For example, the songs “His Box” and “The Judgement is the Mirror” are about the unwillingness, or inability, to understand a spiritual path. The latter song might contain the first direct reference to Sufism in Murphy’s lyrics. It could hint at the Sufi metaphor of polishing the heart to mirror the divine; thus, the ability to open the heart to the divine is the basis of the judgement. However, Sufis are far from alone in using the mirror as a metaphor (Shaw 2019: Chapter 5).

After regularly spending time in Turkey, Murphy moved to Ankara in 1992 with his partner, dancer and choreographer Beyhan Murphy, whom he met in 1982. Beyhan Murphy took up the role of the first director and choreographer of the dance company Modern Dans Topluluğu, formed in 1992. Since 2017, she has been Artistic Director of the Istanbul State Ballet. Murphy continually produces new material and tours with his solo act or with reunion versions of Bauhaus.

In Ankara, Murphy has been associated with the environment around the Sufi Ahmet Kayhan Dede (1898–1998),⁶ and later with an avid proponent of Kayhan Dede called Faruk Dilaver (b. 1946) for whom he has expressed admiration on the Peter Murphy webpage (Murphy 2021). Dede means grandfather in Turkish but is here an honorific title given to a Sufi leader, a Sheikh. Murphy has also affiliated himself with open-minded, Sufi-inclusive environments such as Beshara⁷ and the Chisholme Institute⁸ (about the institutes, see Randall 2016: Chapter 5). On his webpages, he describes himself as a “close friend” (Murphy 2020b).

HANG UP THE PHONE AND COME ON OVER

The first example is from Murphy’s latest full-length album with new material. It presents the complexity of his Sufi-infused lyrics when they have developed in full. “Hang Up” from *Lion* (2014) is shaped by a harsh electronic soundscape with crisp, distorted guitars created by Martin “Youth” Glover, Killing Joke bass player and experienced producer, and Murphy’s energetic singing, oscillating between soft, screamed and distorted. The song is forceful, rich in sounds and gives a rather chaotic first impression. The first verse is intriguing:

Come on over
Said the tripper to the Gauth
Ul-Azam was the Gauth
Cotton Wool Dede

6. After the Dede’s demise, a foundation in Ahmet Kayhan Dede’s name was started. It runs a mosque just outside of Ankara, overseen by Diyanet, where the Dede is buried.

7. <https://beshara.org/>

8. <https://www.chisholme.org/>

Master of Masters
I tell you Dede
From the divers near
Down in deep
I clocked all of you
To a place so fond
Where there even angels are allowed
Where even angels are allowed
Hagia Sophia!

The first phrase, “come on over”, also ends the song after the lyrics encourage the listener (or the singer) to hang up the phone. The idea of crossing is common Sufi imagery. There is a distance between humans and God. It can be bridged, but doing so requires changed perspectives, preferably with the help of a Dede.

In *The Teachings of a Perfect Master*, Henry Bayman relates the following story about Ahmet Kayhan Dede, the master promoted by Bayman: “A brother...experimented with psychedelic drugs years ago. Whereupon the Master told him: ‘You picked up the phone, you got the message. Now hang up the phone and come here’” (Bayman 2012: 9). Bayman, who met Kayhan Dede in 1978 (Bayman 2003), is one of the main promoters of the Dede in English (Bayman, n.d.). As Bayman and Murphy know each other—Murphy is thanked by Bayman in the preface of three of his books⁹ it is likely that Murphy’s inspiration for the lyrics originates in something they both consider their Dede had said.

Murphy consciously makes it tricky for an interpreter. “The tripper” (the man from the story above or a general seeker?) addresses “the Gauth” (the guide), which is a metaphor for a Sufi Dede. Then, Murphy declares that “Ul-Azam” (the greatest) was “the Gauth” which is a reference to *ghawth ul-azam* (Arabic), a phrase meaning the greatest helper, an honorific title for the utmost of spiritual leaders. It is particularly attributed to the Sufi Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166). According to most of his followers, Ahmet Kayhan Dede has a lineage that connects him back to Jilani, among others, and the Dede felt an intellectual bond with Jilani (Avanoğlu 2012). It would not be strange for Murphy to intend to refer to both as they would be assumed to be of the same spiritual essence; additionally, he seemingly uses the phrase for Ahmet Kayhan Dede on his webpage (Murphy 2021).

Abdul Qadir Jilani and Ahmet Kayhan Dede can indeed each be described as a “cotton wool Dede”, “master of masters”. One of the possible etymologies for the word Sufi is the association with wool (*suf*), and the often claimed, early practice of Sufis to dress

9. Bayman 1997, 2000, 2003.

in woollen clothes signalling their humility and their assumed detachment from worldly luxuries.

The next part is introduced by an addresser, an “I”, but one unknown. As the “I” appears in other parts of the lyrics and addresses the master, mastering him, I primarily understand the “I” as God. However, in Sufi prose, God is to be mirrored to the extent that the individual ceases to be. In that sense, there is actually only one true “I”. Sufi poetry is keen on metaphors that are slightly instable, word plays and shrewd reinterpretations of words that signal relationships or pronouns.

If God is “I”, then the “you” in “I clocked all of you” is the human race. The metaphors are not easily untangled in this passage, but the key is that paradise is addressed (“a place so fond where angels are allowed”) and that God has measured everyone’s life span. The ocean (divers, deep) is a common Sufi metaphor to symbolize the vastness of the creation.

Further stressing the Sufi understanding is the interpolated “Hagia Sophia” (holy wisdom), following the verse, sung almost as a refrain. Murphy stresses that the words are holy wisdom, the most important message from God to humans. The meaning of “Hagia Sophia” is not esoteric knowledge; still, some might need to look it up to know that Hagia Sophia also transmits an idea. To some, the first association may be with Hagia Sophia, the landmark museum, mosque (again since 2020) and former church in Istanbul. After the first “Hagia Sophia” iteration, the lyrics continue:

And you are the Ahmad too
 And you are the Jesus, The Moses,
 The Ahmad too
 “Yeah,” says the Gauth
 “True,” says the Hu
 “Hang up –
 – Hang up the phone and come on over”

Even though concepts, metaphors and exact conceptualisations vary between Sufi orders and authors, a shared understanding is that if you successfully manage to reflect yourself in the manifest God, you will ideally inhabit the position of *al-insan al-kamil*, the complete human. This is the position of prophets and the greatest Sufis. Thus, the Dede and also every single one of us are potentially the Ahmad—the most praised one—that is Muhammad, the Jesus and the Moses as well. It is attested in Bayman’s *The Teachings of a Perfect Master* (Bayman 2012: 11) that people used the named prophets to describe Ahmet Kayhan Dede, whose name was also Ahmet. Further, Jesus is a Sufi favourite while Moses is not ignored but is more commonly mentioned in theology when *al-rusul*, the messenger prophets, are named. Of course, Jesus and Moses also signal Christianity and Judaism. Why “the” Jesus, “the” Moses? I see two possibilities: symmetry and the

estrangement effect. The Ahmad stresses the meaning of the word *ahmad*, not merely the name. I doubt that it is the etymology of the names Jesus (from Hebrew, Yah saves) and Moses (from the Greek rendering of the ancient Egyptian word for born) to which Murphy is alluding; rather, it is the role of *al-insan al-kamil*. Yet, the people around Ahmet Kayhan Dede stressed the idea of *al-insan al-kamil* according to Avanoğlu (Avanoğlu 2012), and the disciple Bayman (Bayman 2003: lxiii) claims that almost everyone who met the Dede saw him as *al-insan al-kamil*. By adding the definite article (“the”) the names are rendered in an unfamiliar way to the ear which forces you to wonder about the choice. Murphy likes to keep his audiences on their toes.

“The Gauth” accepts the description as *al-insan al-kamil* with a “yeah”, and “the Hu” confirms by offering “true” as an affirmative. In Sufi meditation and rituals, *hu* is a commonly used word for God. It is based on *huwa*, he, broken down to just the aspirate “hu”, which also means he. Thus, God and “the Gauth” confirm and are also the “I” of the lyrics, encouraging people to come over. After a repetition of a previous part, the following is added:

If the truth be told
 What the tripper saw
 His lessons was [sic] to meet
 To withdraw the devils [sic] gun there¹⁰
 “You’ve been dragging yourself //: through a thorn
 bush with no clothes on”:// (repeated)

The tripper is a Sufi dervish that is asked to learn to control the devil and prepare to be able to meet God. The last part is intriguing. Is it a metaphor for suffering? Is it alluding to the well-known story of the Catholic St. Benedict of Nursia (d. 547) who reputedly threw himself naked into thorn bushes to impede sexual temptation? Is it also biographical? Murphy was well known to appear with at least bared chest during performances with Bauhaus and singing about pain. The final part repeats versions of “Hanging up the phone” but also commands the “master” to do so.

While details of the lyrics are difficult to explicate, the overall message is quite clear if one is familiar with Sufism: give up your individuality, abandon yourself to the sheikh who is already in tune with the divine creator. Intriguingly, Murphy is creating a world, using age-old Sufi imageries but crafting his very personal version in a way that much modern Sufi poetry does not. Combined with the music and performance it becomes feverish, chaotic and in-your-face. Murphy screams, sputters and sings, uses different voices. He does not fall into the trap of representing the different positions in the lyrics

10. This and the following line are rendered like this in the CD folder. Personally, I think Murphy sings “to withdraw the devil’s gun there”.

differently. While lyrical content and performance clash, the lyrics are coherent and contribute to the powerful, chaotic piece.

Below, I provide examples of how Murphy has developed his way of interlacing Sufi tropes over time. Therefore, the presentation is chronological, following the release of Murphy's albums.

SHOULD THE WORLD FAIL TO FALL APART (1986)

Murphy's earliest, unmistakable, Sufi-associated lyrics are from his first solo album, *Should the World Fail to Fall Apart*. It features "Jemal", composed in a cinematic style with a prominent ney flute (or a synth) colouring the soundscape, setting it apart from the rest of the album. The Turkish words, whispered in the background by Beyhan Murphy (acknowledged by the liner note "praying for us"), are a Sufi *du'a* (supplication) by Ahmet Kayhan Dede. The first part is provided in English translation in the booklet to the compilation *Peter Murphy, 5 albums* gathering Murphy's five first solo albums:

My God, grant that we may sow peace wherever we go.
 Let us be reconcilers and unifiers, not sowers of dissent.
 Allow us to disseminate love where there is hate,
 forgiveness where there is injury,
 faith where there is doubt,
 hope where there is despair,
 light where there is darkness,
 and joy where there is sorrow.

An intriguing aspect of this *du'a* is that it is one of the few texts by Ahmet Kayhan Dede which does not draw on Islamic sources. Instead he was inspired by the so-called peace prayer attributed to St Francis of Assisi (d. 1226). Bayman (2012: 23) translated it into Turkish sometime before 1980 and the Dede was impressed with it and made a Sufi version that he then spread, calling it the essence of democracy and an essential part of any religion. It was a typical trait of the Dede to consider all religions as manifestations of Truth.

On the debut album, at times between the lines, Murphy addresses the confrontation with the new, old truth. If considered from a Sufi angle, these lyrics from "God Sends", "Tell my friends they're all potential, they're all potential Godsend. I feel that this is me coming, you'll never meet me", make sense. "Me" can be God but also the reformed "me" seeking God while "I" then becomes Murphy himself. Here, "friends" are either referred to as having the potential to enter into a relation with the Truth (with a capital T) or as instruments of God (Godsends) who usher the "I" forward towards the Truth. The final phrase yet again plays with positionality. When the Sufi associates with himself he can never meet the divine aspect, the "me", as is used in the well-known Sufi poem by Rumi (d. 1273):

There came one and knocked at the door of the Beloved.
 And a voice answered and said, “Who is there?”
 The lover replied, “It is I.”
 “Go hence”, returned the voice,
 “there is no room within for you and me.”
 Then came the lover a second time and knocked and again the voice de-
 manded,
 “Who is there?”
 He answered: “It is you.”
 “Enter”, said the voice, “for I am within”.

No doubt, Murphy has for long been well aware of Rumi’s poetry and there is a quote from Rumi on Petermurphy.info (Murphy 2020a, see also Westworld 1995).

LOVE HYSTERIA (1988)

The next album, *Love Hysteria*, already features the clearer use of Sufis tropes. Thematically, the lyrics seems to be mainly a dialogue between Murphy and his wife about embarking on a journey into mysticism. In “His Circle and Hers Meet” he declares “She killed his past // with her kiss // All past was but a lie // She killed his head // she killed his mouth // and opened up the sky”. If “she” is God or Beyhan Murphy or both makes little difference. In my reading, I think both are intended. I perceive “his” as Peter Murphy who realizes that his past, head and mouth – that is his worldview, mind and previous enunciations – have been based on a flawed understanding of the world. In his lyrics, Murphy regularly alternates between addressing himself in the first, second and third person. This is not merely a clever way of obtaining variety, but frequently related to a Sufi worldview.

At the time, Murphy was reading widely and, typically, “Socrates the Python” contains a repeated shout-out to “Bennett, Gurdjieff, Jesus” referring to John G. Bennett (d. 1974), a disciple of George Gurdjieff (d. 1949), and the prophet Jesus, important to both Christianity and Islam, not least to Sufis. In interviews, Murphy states that he relates to Truth (a recurrent word in lyrics too) and Truth can be found anywhere in any tradition, even though he mainly approaches it through Sufism. Thus, some phrases might fit most mystic traditions, like the twice repeated line “The illusion is the pain” from “Time Has Got Nothing to Do with It”, or “hell is not the fire // hell is your belief // in yourself as the higher” from “Dragnet Drag”. Still, much is specifically meaningful through a Sufi prism, for example this section from “My Last Two Weeks”:

Am I untruthful?
 As a result of being?
 Maybe

Maybe it was too soon
 The red rose
 I liken it to the flicker of the pure
 Fleeting moments
 Precede our actions
 Light that's not burning
 Light that's not burning
 No more lost sinking feeling
 Tethered to your shoe
 Tethered to you

Some of the metaphors used are very common. The red rose, a well-established symbol, is a glimpse of the pure, that is, the divine essence. Light is a symbol of the same. “Tethered” is more important than shoe, the latter is witty and unexpected. Tethered, on the other hand, indicates the relation with both the Dede and the divine, as one cannot be real without leaving the untruthfulness of being and accepting the relation to the divine, according to a Sufi approach. The final stanza adds that the “we” in the song are tethered to the red rose as well, further emphasising the dependence on the divine. Yet, some of the strength of poetic language and lyrics stems from not being tied to one specific interpretation but, rather, remaining open. That Murphy is aware of the importance of this is clear from the first quote of this article.

DEEP (1989)

In his third album, *Deep*, Murphy continues to explore his relation to the divine and the Truth. In “Shy”, Murphy reflects about his past in the third person.

He was thought of as strange... a good, good looking man
 And shallow eyes like two hidden from view and empty puddles of hue
 His views on death spread like two anecdotal tales
 Although he, reclining, declining, to disclose in public...
 These opinions in public, the tales held the key.

Murphy was, and is, often described as handsome, and in interviews he frequently still refers, in an ironic yet self-conscious manner, to being good-looking. Many photos show him with deep set eyes and that, coupled with singing about death (albeit among other things), earned him the aforementioned moniker, the godfather of goth. But, even in the Bauhaus lyrics, he was reflecting on spiritual matters so the “tales held the key” to his future quest. In the same song he rather straightforwardly declares his metamorphosis.

One day you will be the one
 To say I'm sick of empty fun

It means if your faith is strong
It means
You are no longer astray...
See I see all the light, it comes straight from the sun
And I want to get near, so I can be clear
Soon I will
Merge with the one
Soon I will
Be with the love
One day
When the lights turn green
There is no time... this love I thirst.

Apart from rehearsing the common merging and light metaphors, the lyrics also convey a sense of an awaited, soon to be complete transformation, yet, as always, it is possible to understand them in different ways. Is the anticipated meeting the one with other dervishes, and the green light a nod to the green, fluorescent lamps so common in mosques and Sufi lodge settings? Or is it mainly the meeting with the divine, where time lacks meaning, for which he thirsts, with the green light simply being a reference to the colour of Islam and a signal of his acceptance of Sufism?

Another clear theme on *Deep* is doubt and the questioning of the ability to experience closeness to God fully, combined with the realisation that it takes hard work. “The Line Between the Devil’s Teeth (and that which Cannot be Repeat)” is a song about inner jihad, with the chorus “war, work” repeated over and over. In Islamic theology, it is common to discern between the greater and lesser jihad. Jihad means striving, struggle. The greater jihad is the inner battle against sin, and the lesser jihad is the outward struggle against threats against Islam. I have chosen inner jihad rather than greater, as I think it better conveys Murphy’s understanding of jihad. In a particularly clear passage, Murphy sings:

Push me in, take me t’ward
The subject in the subject taught
A war without a war within
Join head and heart for to begin

In Sufi thinking, the ability to understand the divine dwells in the heart. To learn to align the head and heart requires discipline and conscious striving towards the “subject”. The war requires work.

Yet another nod to Sufism is calling the recording band on *Deep* “The hundred men”, a name also used on the next album, *Holy Smoke* (1992). It is claimed that Farid al-Din Attar (d. 1221) described legendary Sufi saint Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. around 801) in the

following manner: “No she wasn’t a single woman but a hundred men over.”¹¹ Murphy also uses the expression “hundred men” in a song, “All Night Long” on *Love Hysteria*. This is likely not a coincidence.

A STRANGE KIND OF HIT

Murphy does not have any huge hits, but one of the songs that has reached a larger audience is “A Strange Kind of Love” from *Deep*. The song can be described as a dark ballad in A minor, built largely around Murphy’s vocals, mostly in his lower register, a guitar and a few additional instruments. Nothing in the song indicates any influences from any other tradition than Anglo-American pop. The minor key and the texture of the voice has a dark tone, some might even consider it a bit ominous, although I do not.

Browsing through a few internet forums, many suggest the song is a conventional love song of a sort. I only found one comment suggesting it is about religion but framing it as a conversion narrative (from Catholicism to Islam). However, to me the lyrics are anchored in a Sufi worldview, Murphy’s biography and in the overall topic of *Deep*: the difficulty of fully and unconditionally committing.

I. A strange kind of love
 A strange kind of feeling
 Swims through your eyes
 And like the doors
 To a wide vast dominion
 They open to your prize
 II. This is no terror ground
 Or place for the rage
 No broken hearts
 White wash lies
 Just a taste for the truth
 Perfect taste choice and meaning
 A look into your eyes
 III. Blind to the gemstone alone
 A smile from a frown circles round
 Should he stay or should he go
 Let him shout a rage so strong
 A rage that knows no right or wrong

11. This oft-times repeated quote (in books, articles, internet posts) is claimed to be from the masterpiece *The Conference of the Birds*. Not that it matters for my argument, the popular belief that it is from the book is more significant, but I find it puzzling that I cannot find the quote despite having consulted two different translations of the book and searched an online version with keywords.

And take a little piece of you
 IV. There is no middle ground
 Or that's how it seems
 For us to walk or to take
 Instead we tumble down
 Either side left or right
 To love or to hate.

The first section uses rather regular Sufi tropes put into rock lyrics form. God is symbolized by love in two ways: God is the reality of love and the object of love of the lover, that is, the Sufi. This is easier to comprehend given that a) God is thought to be outside the human perceptual apparatus, and b) Sufi metaphors are in line with Hellenist philosophers in that they assume that the trained Sufi (or philosopher) can experience (or think) beyond the immanent reality when approaching God (or the ideal, true idea). God is the only real reality and is the direction towards which the Sufi must turn in love to be able to mirror the true idea of love, thus “a strange kind of love”. Important in this context is also the role of the Dede Ahmet Kayhan in manifesting God's love and presence.

The lyrics describe a change of perception, like doors opening to “a wide vast dominion”. The recurring use of the second person connects to the constant role play with pronouns that are typical not least for Rumi's and Yunus Emre's (d. 1320) poetry. Thus, “you” has a double meaning. A Sufi trope is that God has hidden a secret (*sirr*) in our hearts—not the muscle pumping blood but a metaphor for the soul, which has the faculty of reasoning and thus can also be called our consciousness. It is the task of the Sufis to find that secret and, with the help of it, redirect themselves towards God. Thus, finding the secret is a “prize”. But as the prize is God's, “your” likely also refers to God or the Dede.

The second stanza starts with four lines describing what the experience is not. There is no room for terror, rage, broken hearts or excuses (“white wash lies”). Instead, the experience offers a “taste for the truth” and “a look into your [God's or the Dede's] eyes” and that is symbolized by perfection. Sufi poets love playing around with *eros* and *agape*, erotic love versus the unconditional love of God. By using metaphors evoking *eros* but pointing at *agape*, a language of love and eroticism permeates Sufi poetry.

I interpret the first lines of the third part as expressions of doubt. “Blind to the gemstone alone” voices the frustration of someone who has caught a glimpse of the divine but who cannot hang on to it like the others assembled. Here the gemstone is the prize referred to above, while blind is a well-used metaphor for inability. The others are the Sufis that meet regularly in a circle (not necessarily in that form but it is referred to as such in Sufi contexts). But they share an inviting smile, or perhaps that comes from the Dede. They, or the Dede, know these things take time and they can see Murphy's frustration and wonder whether he should stay or go. Yet, in the midst of frustration,

a glimpse of God (through the Dede) in the form of “a little piece of you”, has been perceived.

The fourth stanza declares that there is no middle ground and that the choice is between love of God or hate and rage caused by shortcomings and the inability to let love in. It is fully possible that the song is meant to be a rather straightforward love song to Ahmet Kayhan Dede. It does not really affect any of the intellectualisation of the lyrics but, undoubtedly, love was intensely felt by many of Ahmet Kayhan Dede’s visitors and followers (Avanoğlu 2012).

Deep is particularly interesting for its treatment of the oscillation between commitment and doubt in the personal ability, not in the truth on offer. I would claim that there is a clear autobiographical trait in the lyrics but cleverly embedded in the rock lyrics format, keeping the ambiguity.

HOLY SMOKE (1992) AND CASCADE (1995)

On the following two albums—*Holy Smoke* and *Cascade*—similar lyrics are rehearsed. If anything, the certainty that the path is the right one increases. These albums also coincide with Murphy increasingly relocating to Turkey, eventually moving to Ankara allowing him and his partner to be close to Ahmet Kayhan Dede during the last years of his life (d. 1998). Several trends in these five first albums culminate in the lyrics to “Mirror to My Woman’s Mind”, whose lyrics consciously interlace God with “my woman”.

It was time to kick the façade
Walk into the room
Disappear without a trace
O’ then I recognised you

It was bright
It was dark
You could say
I couldn’t start
I couldn’t feel
If the words were right

You were right
I was gone
When you said that the fight was on
With one look I was yours
The things you gave
The things I took

See that star?
In the sky
It's the mirror to my woman's mind
Let me burn in her fire
In that mirror to my woman's mind.

Murphy declares his commitment and love for God, using the image of the ego being consumed by divine flames as a repeated key passage in the lyrics. At the same time, the song is also a love song to his wife who opened this path to him, thus using the *eros* versus *agape* formula in a very conscious way. Murphy never describes the features of his love or love making in his take on *eros*. Rather, his lyrics evoke images of completion, union, submission and even annihilation (of the ego). Another dimension is that the song can also be understood as Murphy recounting his first meeting with Ahmet Kayhan Dede. The lines before the cited lyrics above run:

I took your hand, felt the heat of a different fate
Took some time to tell you my name
I could smell the sense of fear
Had been lifted from your face

God, Beyhan Murphy and the Dede constantly become interlaced. At the time, Murphy had an active relation with Ahmet Kayhan Dede, who is celebrated in phrases such as “We call to stillness, as we kiss the water king's hand” (from the song “Cascade”). The Dede is said to have recurrently urged his listeners to follow the ethics of the water, soil, sun and night, which never complain no matter what is done to them (Avanoğlu 2012), hence the water king. Kissing the Dede's hand is part of the ritual of greeting and parting.¹² Hanson's liner notes to *Bareboned and Sacred* (2016) support such an interpretation.

DUST (2002)

Dust introduces a new element in Murphy's music. It is the only Murphy album to date that can be called world music. On it, he collaborates with Mercan Dede, a celebrated Turkish Sufi musician who had earlier provided the music to the show “Syahatname 2001,” directed and choreographed by Beyhan Murphy and her dance company. He is internationally known and has received prizes for, among other things, the best world music album of 2008 by Womex (his album *800*). *Dust* is co-produced by Murphy and

12. See. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yglRkf-wI4k>. Accessed 10 January 2022.

Mercan Dede and much of the instrumental atmosphere on the album can be attributed to him. Murphy singing is at its absolute prime, varied and adaptive yet challenging the musical texture.

Even the title of the album is probably a Sufi reference. Dust (*habā'a*) is described, in *A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms* by 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani (d. 1130), as “the substance in which God first imbued the form of the world. It is that intangible material which is known as Primordial Matter” (al-Qashani 1991: 17). The title could thus be a reference to the created world which, according to Sufi thought, forms the basis of our connection to God but also makes up the very foundation of human exile. On the track “Fake Sparkle or Golden Dust?” Murphy uses “Golden Dust” as a metaphor for the divine signs in the world.

The first track “Things to Remember” is an ambient world music tune, at times softly spoken, at times sung. The music first features moody synthesisers, nay (Turkish reed flute), and a prominent santur. When Murphy starts singing against this very contemporary Turkish background with clear hints to Sufism, a bass and drums burst into the music. The lyrics offer an almost matter of fact acceptance of the majesty and mystery of God (I have for the sake of brevity not indicated repeated phrases).

Floating
 I'm facing me down
 Prostrate to the ground
 Understand
 Prostrate to the ground
 Mystery
 Rain down on my life
 Maybe there is nothing to say
 Breathing
 The future is gone
 The strain of the past
 Sometimes nothing often means
 The beauty of the human experience
 Healing
 Rain down on my life
 Down on my life
 Wasted
 Now, breaking free
 It's no longer me

The lyrics emphasize the assumed meditative calm of prayer and the transformative power of the acceptance of God. Ritual, daily prayers were frequently stressed as the foundation of practice by Ahmet Kayhan Dede (Avanoğlu 2012; Bayman 2012). The

recurrent “rain” is a common metaphor within Sufi lyrics for God’s benevolence but also for the specific act of blessing humanity with Muhammad.

Several of the other songs are rather indirect in their Sufi referencing. “Just for Love” toys around with love as his love for his muse, her connection with Sufism, the Dede and the love of God, as does “Your Face”. “Jungle Haze” is unusual. It has an accusatory tone directed to religious people that do not follow “the silent sway [i.e. Sufism]” and instead build “temples made of sand” and flaunt their power with gold that is “just cold, cold steel”. Together with “Fake Sparkle or Golden Dust?”, my impression is that Murphy is actually propagating his faith to an unknown other. Generally, songs about doubt have involved Murphy himself, but that is not the case in these songs. Unexpectedly, this is not Murphy’s Sufi album. It is neither a start of a new career steered towards Turkey or spiritual world music, which is a huge genre.

UNSHATTERED (2004), NINTH (2011) AND LION (2014)

On his later albums, Murphy takes on Sufism in ways he has already established. He skilfully develops his own means of addressing Sufi tropes, continues his playfulness with the notions of *eros* and *agape* and contributes some of his most intricate lyrics. “Emergency Unit” from *Unshattered* positions humanity as in an emergency unit turning to God to be saved.

Save me, save me, make me true
Turn, turn, let me through
Nothing’s hard and nothing’s to be gained
Without you.
Leave us always looking in the now
Guide is always
Save me, save me, say “you do”
Even as the bird flies
Out in the blue
Out of the blue
Nothing’s hard and nothing’s gained
Without you.

The idea of trying to be in the now, connected to God, is a recurrent trope in Murphy’s Sufi-laced lyrics. This is then contrasted with being swept away by the ego, conflicts and the everyday, a struggle that is further developed in “The First Stone” from the same album:

Check the day out
The human race is doing time

Locked in some flimsy cage
 Made of the stuff of the free will kind
 Hear my heart smash
 My self-made throne
 Hoping not to cast
 That first stone.

The idea of having accepted the “Sufi Truth” but still not being able to avoid anger, mistakes and the ego is an important topic on this and the upcoming records. There is also the observation about the others, the ones that have not understood. They are imprisoned by the illusion of their own free will instead of embracing the omnipotency of God. Still, the “I” of the lyrics should be aware not to cast the first stone even if that “I” has destroyed its ego with its heart. The Biblical stone metaphor just is one example of how not all lyrics draw from Sufi tropes. Then again, that trope in itself is well-spread and commented on by Sufis too.

Ninth is an album full of hints alluding to possible Sufi ideas. One of the most original is “Memory Go”.

Fade away.
 Is that not,
 What was what...
 What you thought?
 Drop that cause.
 Now is all!
 Memory go.
 Junk the pause!
 Let it go.
 Left behind.
 Discreate sentimental blind.
 Then is gone.
 If debunk.
 Memory go.
 Reject the junk!
 Memory go.
 Memory.

Murphy dwells on the idea of freeing one’s mind from the constraints of the past. The idea of leaving the past behind and living in the now, content with being in love with God, is an important topic for Murphy. While Sufi poetry is often marked by flowery prose, these lyrics are minimalist, marked by short, uncomplicated words and yet harbor complex ideas.

Another example of this recurrent topic is “Never Fall Out”, about the love of God formulated from the position of God, although it could also be understood as Murphy bragging about his attraction for his fans, again creating conscious ambiguity.

If you fall in love with me,
 You'll never fall out!
 If you take me in,
 There'll be no way out. Without.
 You'll never fall out.
 Effulgate,¹³ and you'll see the divine;
 The pouring of love's wine.
 My iridescent, iridescent blue.
 I'll be, I'll be all over you.
 If you catch my glance,
 You'll swim the swan sea.
 Dissolve into ether dreams.
 The truth of you and me.

Murphy uses the idea of the *unio mystica*—the union of the believer's soul with God—reformulated as rock lyrics. In Islamic prose two prominent words express this, *fana'* and *baqa'*, the difference being that *fana'* is temporary and *baqa'* not. The lyrics imply a permanent union. By now, we recognise the play with pronouns and the references to love and light (effulgate, iridescent). Another song, “Secret Silk Society”, spells out how difficult the union is: “Who is wise? Why our hearts! Made for passing the lote tree, it is very, very far, very far indeed!” The heart is the centre of gnosis (enlightened wisdom) predisposed to enable us to find God who, in Islamic mythology, resides in the domain past the lote tree (*sidrat al-muntaha*) of the seventh heaven.

In “Holy Clown” from *Lion*, Murphy addresses the insight that being a Sufi is not an achievement that requires – or should be used to gain – the respect of others: “Some part of you is fooled// some heart of you is fooled// this is no crown// find your holy clown.” The idea of the Sufi as breaking conventions and becoming a fool in the eyes of others permeates Sufi poetry and lore. Further, Murphy (Orcasound 2004) comments in an interview, with reference to the contemporary Sufi Idries Shah (d. 1996), that if people call themselves a Sufi, they are not. The act of taking pride in the role (wearing a crown) is proof that one is not what one claims.

Initially, I discussed “Hang up” from *Lion* extensively. We have now come full circle. Murphy's lyrics keep developing and the Sufi topics are recurrent. However most of the lyrics on *Lion* are generally rather impressionistic lacking that clear autobiographical

13. As far as I can tell this is a made-up word based on effulgent, luminous, radiant.

Sufi narrative that I have traced. It is there on “Hang up”. He declares who he is no longer in “I am My Own Name”: “No jade shock star // Or blackened thorn // No heathen cynic // No lover scorned”. But generally, only a few of the tracks draws clearly from Sufism.

ADDING MUSIC AND SOME SORT OF CONCLUSION

As of now, I have not analysed the music, merely indicated a few forms. Music-wise, Murphy has continued to compose songs along the lines he had already established prior to introducing Sufism into his lyrics. His most daring turns have been when he has collaborated with other musicians who have their own established profiles such as Mick Karn (Dali’s Car), Mercan Dede on *Dust* and Youth on *Lion*. Murphy has a broad vocal register and he may sing a straightforward melody with few tones, or scream, whisper, be operatic or use odd, theatrical voices. His voice has a distinct timbre, making it instantly recognizable, which is a bit odd as he sings using many different techniques. This is a trait already found on the first recordings with Bauhaus even though he is now a far more experienced singer. As far as I can tell, there are no aesthetic choices or considerations made in consequence of singing about God, Sufism, Sufi dervishes or Dede. Murphy draws inspiration from Sufi ideas, almost completely detached from the expectations of what that may mean for the musical form with the soul except of *Dust*. On the contrary, Murphy seems to enjoy his audience’s celebrating him as a cult figure in rock, an audience that seems to be somewhat unaware of how much his lyrics are permeated by his Sufi worldview.

Then again, Murphy is not making “Sufi music” or writing Sufi poetry that is then sung. Rather, he draws inspiration from Sufi lore, Sufi thinking, Sufi poetic tropes and his experience of Sufism, which makes up one enabling frame for Murphy’s writing. Ambiguity, surprising metaphors, drastic formulations and hyperbolic claims form an oeuvre of songs filled with associations and mystical ideas. Despite exposing one of his key frames of reference as Sufism, the lyrics are still hard to explain, which is likely the very idea behind them. They are not didactic verses or meant to be rendered as Sufi prose. Music and lyrics form a unit. The fact that the musical form does not support the potential Sufi meaning is entirely on purpose; indeed, the reverse is true. The Sufism-drenched lyrics support musical expressions that often aim to create atmosphere, drama and powerful emotional expressions.

As exemplified above, Murphy has developed novel ways to express recurrent Sufi tropes, which are removed from the conventional genres and merged with another genre (rock lyrics), with its own forms, conventions and tropes, some of the latter overlapping with Sufi tropes. That meeting produces some new metaphors for expressing Sufi tropes, but most importantly, it enables Murphy—who is not a Sufi artist, but a rock artist who finds inspiration and trajectories in his Sufi attachment—to create. From an Islamic studies point of view, here lies his most original contribution.

Ahmet Kayhan Dede claimed that everyone should express Islam or Sufism, which he used interchangeably, by exploring their own expressions, thus encouraging musicians, dancers and other artists to create within their form and training (Avanoğlu 2012). There is no single, fixed way. I cannot confirm that Murphy is specifically under the influence of Ahmet Kayhan Dede in this, but he certainly follows the advice. Through his songs, he has created an original way to draw from Sufism.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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”BECAUSE MODERN PEOPLE BELIEVE IN NEW SKYDADDY” SHIFTING BUDDHIST IDENTITIES AND AUTHORITIES ON REDDIT

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ABSTRACT

Online religion may challenge traditional forms of practice, ideas, values, hierarchies, and authorities. This article explores some of the complex ways in which Buddhism is practiced as a lived religion on the internet. It looks at three case studies from the subreddit /r/Buddhism on Reddit.com and uses these examples as springboards for a broader discussion of Buddhist identity, authority, and authenticity in the twenty-first century. The article also discusses recent relevant scholarship and suggests that Reddit is a valuable yet understudied source of insight into the lives of ordinary religious practitioners in the twenty-first century. The article in particular highlights how Reddit can be a source of insight into “the broad variety of articulations of religious identities, such as the stories of women, gay people and other groups whose voices have been marginalized in religious communities throughout history” (Lövheim 2012: 163).

KEYWORDS

Digital Buddhism - identity - authority - authenticity - digital religion -
Buddhism in the West - Reddit

INTRODUCTION

The digital world is an engine of religious change, as people from different backgrounds and contexts come together to create “new, dynamic opportunities for self-expression of belief and religious lifestyle practice” (Campbell 2011: 71). In particular, online religious expressions often challenge notions of traditional hierarchies and authority, exhibit

a heightened sense of individualism, and are marked by a ‘pick-and-mix’ approach in order to present “a self from the plurality of religious symbols circulated online” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 59). Similarly, expressions of digital religion often challenge traditional notions of what is ‘authentically’ religious. This article looks at Buddhism and Buddhist discourse online, with Reddit as its focus. It aims to discuss topics related to Buddhist modernism—or what possibly more properly could be called Buddhist post-modernism—and questions concerning Buddhist identity, authenticity, and authority. The article will first build a framework to work from with a basis in recent scholarship on the topic, which will make it easier to understand the discussion later, before moving on to Reddit as a case study and discussing the findings. What kinds of Buddhism(s) do we see reflected on the site? Is the Buddhism we see mostly secular but spiritual, as we might expect from Buddhist modernism, or is it in fact entirely religious? The examples that will be examined highlight some of the ways in which Buddhism is used by people to navigate their lives, helping them make sense of their surrounding environments, while playing an essential role in their identity formation. In the context of Reddit, this entails a huge variety of individual approaches and understandings of Buddhism that in turn highlight ways in which religion in general plays a pivotal role for sense-making and identity formation for people today.

A key aim of the article is to highlight the complex ways in which Buddhism is enacted and changed online and in the digital world. Far from being an anachronism, Buddhism is a living, fluid religion with a vibrant online presence, and we can learn much from studying these religious expressions online, in addition to textual analyses of older texts and materials. The modernization of Buddhism is a “complicated process of hybridization” that results in “a proliferation of Buddhisms adapted to contemporary global contexts” (Harding et al. 2020: 7). The internet is just such a contemporary global context, and it is well worth studying it in order to understand religious change. As has been pointed out, using the Internet for religious activity could become the dominant form religious experience in the future (Gandhi 2019: 2). Examining digital religion is therefore an essential part of understanding religion in the twenty-first century.

METHODS, SOURCES, AND ETHICS

This article is based on a case study of Reddit posts about three homemade Buddhist altars. The subreddit in question, /r/Buddhism, is very active, with plenty of posts every day, and as of the time of writing (April 2023) a total of 661,739 users are members of the community.¹ A number of elements on the site itself are worth examining—for

1. /r/Buddhism means it is a subreddit dedicated to Buddhism. /r/chess is a subreddit dedicated to chess; /r/tennis would lead to a subreddit dedicated to tennis, and so forth. There are in fact a great many (if not a bewildering amount of) subreddits, including ones dedicated to specific branches of Buddhism:

instance, an FAQ section with several interesting links, as well as a set of guidelines for posting. One of these rules is that “posts with New Kadampa Tradition-supporting content will be removed.” This is highly interesting in itself, but the article will not be going into any detail regarding these cursory matters and will for the most part forego discussing them. The focus is rather on the content actually posted and discussed by the users taking part in the subreddit.

I began the process of data selection by looking at posts about altars, typically home-made altars, before looking more closely at the specific users posting about these altars in order to find out what kinds of discourses are popular and possible on the site. The selection was originally much larger, and the three case studies focused on here were originally chosen on the basis that they contained pictures of altars that the users had shared on the site. The fact that they turned out to be remarkable examples of minority representation was a happy accident, but I suspect it is not entirely accidental. The extent to which the examples in the article are representative of a wider trend requires further study, but the examples and a more in-depth look at the site do suggest that they are a part of a broader trend of individualized forms of identity formation online, where people utilize a pick-and-mix approach to religion to find what they are searching for—be it meaning, spiritual fulfillment, community, or what have you. I have also limited the corpus by looking only at posts made between 2022–2023, with most of them effectively from November 2022 to early December 2022, though a few are recent (that is, up to April 2023).

Reddit is popular overwhelmingly in the United States and more generally in the Western world, with the United States making up almost 50 % of the traffic on the site. It is also skewed towards men, with about 70 % of users being male. It is, however, the nineteenth most popular website on the internet, which indicates that it is popular elsewhere as well. The trends and data one finds on Reddit may have relevance and influence beyond the website as such. The “online and offline worlds are simultaneously connected” and the “debates and processes that take place on the internet ... highlight the ways in which modern Buddhism” is “multiple and complex” (Gandhi 2019: 13, 19). It seems reasonable to assume that the influences go both ways, even if the brunt of the weight, at least in terms of numbers, is felt in the West when studying digital aspects of religion.

I am aware that studying a social site like Reddit, which is based on user-interaction and discussions among real people, involves some ethical dimensions that must be considered. I have therefore consulted a variety of guidelines to follow. In particular, I have looked at the ones offered by the *Association of Internet Researchers*. A site like Reddit is largely anonymous and username-based, and real-life identities are obscured unless

/r/theravada, /r/Vajrayana, and so on. This paper will deal with the biggest of them, /r/buddhism. The full link would be [reddit.com/r/Buddhism](https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism).

the person in question is a “verified user”—typically a celebrity or politician or something of that kind. Most of the data that I will use in what follows will be based on the content of the posts and the reactions and discourse of both; the users themselves will be as anonymous, just as they are on the site. Additionally, the *National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities* (NESH) mentions that there are a few exceptions to the rule that one must inform subjects that they are being studied. One such exception is if the research concerns “open areas.” I would argue that sites like Reddit are akin to these open areas, only in the online world. Since Reddit is a website open for all to access, the posts made there must be expected to receive attention. I will provide links to the posts being discussed in footnotes for ease of access. Though /r/Buddhism is an open subreddit, more intricate ethical questions would come up if it were in fact a closed subreddit where one would have to request permission to join. Though it is not entirely relevant here, it is nonetheless an interesting ethical question surrounding the study of digital religion in general.²

BUDDHIST MODERNISM AND IDENTITIES

There has been a “strong current” from the 1800s to make Buddhism modern, to “make Buddhism into a world religion” (Harding et al. 2020: 1). This process is long, complicated, and still ongoing. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the Western world has imported Buddhism through colonialism and simply superimposed Western values onto an ancient, unchanging religious tradition—more or less providing an essentialist view of Buddhism even as it has existed and exists in Asia today (Harding et al. 2020: 5). This, of course, is not only an oversimplification but also an unhelpful way of looking at the topic, which additionally completely removes Asian agency (Harding et al. 2020: 5). As McMahan puts it, if we see the development of Buddhism since the 1800s purely through the lens of Western influence, it “occludes the agency of Asian Buddhists as co-creators of modernist versions of their traditions (2008: 21).” It is important to note that we are dealing with “broad tendencies that coexist in creative tension with traditional elements, with neither side winning out wholesale” (McMahan 2008: 59). Indeed, in some cases, Buddhists have adopted a kind of “strategic occidentalism” or a “reverse orientalism” in order to appeal to Western sensibilities (McMahan 2008: 96).

In a nutshell, the central characteristics of this type of globalized and modernized Buddhism are rationalism and individualism as well as the idea that Buddhism and Buddhist monastics should be more involved with society (Harding et al. 2020: 2). In particular, the scientific and rational framing of Buddhism is important: Buddhism is viewed as a “way of living”, that is in essence “scientific, universal, instrumental, and empir-

2. Consider, for instance, private Discord communities, which are often connected to particular subreddits and communities.

ically based” (McMahan 2017: 118). In places like Burma, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, lay meditation, especially vipassana meditation, has become much more important and has taken on a much more significant role than it had in the past, largely developed and popularized by Burmese meditation teachers and by the Indian layman S. N. Goenka who taught vipassana meditation in Sri Lanka and Nepal (Berkwitz 2010: 203). In this tradition, it is now believed that even laypeople can reach nirvana with vipassana meditation (Berkwitz 2010: 204). This focus on the individual, where the authority in regard to what counts as legitimate religion and spiritual beliefs lies in the hands of the individuals themselves, is a recent and modern phenomenon, and it highlights one of the ways in which Buddhist modernism is not simply a Western phenomenon but involves significant changes also within Asia (McMahan 2008: 212). In a more traditional view of Buddhism, meanwhile, the teacher/pupil relationship is absolutely key (Gethin 1998: 37). As McMahan points out, Buddhist communities have become increasingly intertwined with secular institutions and cultural forces, which grants them greater legitimacy and prestige. Far from leading to the decline of Buddhism, modernization is instead an “engine of religious change” (2017: 125).

Buddhism is thus not just a lived religion., It is also a living one that adapts and changes in response to broader, often global, influences. Since Buddhism lacks a fundamental centralized form of authority, it can sometimes be difficult to get at what exactly the core of Buddhism is, and *who exactly* is a Buddhist (Darlington 2018: 77–78). In scholarship there has been a tendency to look at textual sources to construct Buddhism, creating normative versions heavily reliant on these sources (Gould and McKay 2020: 145–146). But as Gethin (1998: 35) points out, “Buddhism cannot be reduced to a collection of theoretical writings nor a philosophical system of thought.” This approach has therefore been criticized: “A bias towards texts as the shibboleth of religiosity has been critiqued by a focus within studies of ‘lived religion’” (Gould and McKay 2020: 146). Thus, the focus should be on Buddhism on the ground, so to speak, and in order to understand Buddhism today one must have, besides an engagement with canonical and textual sources, a genuine engagement “with Buddhism as it is lived in complex topographies of history, society, and international information flows in the new-media age” (Gould and McKay 2020: 143). This article aims to look at the new-media aspect in particular.

We should not go into an examination of Buddhism online with the idea that there exists a ‘pure’ or ‘untarnished’ Buddhism elsewhere that we can compare it with, either in a historical sense or in the present. Instead, it is important to recognize that it is not quite reasonable to expect Western forms of Buddhism to “adhere rigidly to their Asian predecessors,” especially since they *too* are “hybrids embracing numerous cultural adaptations” (McMahan 2008: 254). Part of what is interesting about studying Buddhism online is the proliferation of opinions and views, some of which lean towards what McMahan (2008: 246) describes as people “attempting to reappropriate tradition,

to cast off some of the staples of Buddhist modernism, and to reassert more conventional views of the Dharma.” At the risk of beating a dead horse, I still find it worthwhile to put a great deal of emphasis on this point: these processes are complex and variegated, and one must see Buddhism as both a living and lived religion. On top of that, what people *say* online can be understood as a form of religious *action*, in the sense that they are *doing things* with words: “When we issue a meaningful utterance, we may succeed at the same time in performing illocutionary acts as promising, warning, entreating, informing, and so on” (Skinner 2002: 98). Understood here, this means that what people say online is not just speech per se, but it is *actually doing religion* (or religioning) with words. As such, the internet could become not just an essential part of religious *experience*, but in fact an essential part of *religious doing* (i.e., the acting out of religious beliefs and thoughts) as well.

SECULARISM AND BUDDHISM

One particularly salient aspect of Buddhism that is relevant for our purposes is the concept of secular Buddhism. Batchelor (2012: 87) provides three definitions for secularism: 1) perhaps the most common way today, where it has come to mean whatever “stands in contrast or opposition to whatever is called religious”; 2) from the etymological roots of the term, meaning “this age” or “the concerns we have about *this* world”; and 3) the traditional definition where it means the “transfer of authority over a certain area of life from the Church to the ‘temporal power’ of the State.” In his article, Batchelor sets out to show that Buddhism and “Dharma” fit all three and that in fact it is possible to get a “taste of nirvana” through modern-day conceptions of mindfulness and in a context that is entirely secular in all three senses of the term (Batchelor 2012: 88). He goes on to argue that it must be possible to practice Buddhism—or the Dharma—even without adhering to “the tenets of ancient Indian soteriology”, and he claims that the idea that one has to makes “little sense” (Batchelor 2012: 89). These arguments are similar to the ones mentioned by McMahan above.

Batchelor launches the idea of what he styles “Buddhism 2.0”, which must be “founded upon canonical source texts, be able to offer a coherent interpretation of key practices, doctrine and ethical precepts” while at the same time providing a coherent and cohesive “model of the dharma to serve as the basis for a flourishing human existence” (Batchelor 2012: 90). This is similar to the secular understanding of Buddhism that Higgins (2012) has sketched elsewhere, where he also points out that this view of Buddhism is largely a Western phenomenon (Higgins 2012: 110). In the secular Buddhism that Higgins and Batchelor promote, they essentially seek to renew “the Buddha’s tradition” by freeing the teachings of “later commentarial spin” and by “developing affinities between it and fertile social practices and intellectual developments in the host societies” (Higgins 2012: 111). In this sense, Buddhism 2.0 is entirely stripped of metaphysics and is primarily a pragmatic belief system where the only really important thing is adhering to

the practical ‘essentials’ of what the Buddha said (Batchelor 2012: 90, 102–104). In the end, Batchelor argues, the rise of secular Buddhism signals not the death of Buddhism, but instead is a “sign of the waning power of the orthodoxies that have held sway for the past two thousand or so years” (Batchelor 2012: 106).

Higgins is critical of some of the successes of Buddhism in the West, partly because it has become something of a brand. He writes that “the Buddhism brand” becomes “a fashion label” (Higgins 2012: 115), and he is especially critical of “New Age spiritualities and shallower psychotherapeutic currents” that he contends essentially “draw on vulgarized Buddhism” (Higgins 2012: 121). There is a fascinating juxtaposition here between Higgins’ opening up of Buddhism to function within secular contexts and his gatekeeping in terms of what ‘real’ Buddhism is and should be. In reality, however, many have used Buddhist ideas, for instance, to cope with the recent (and on-going) pandemic, and some mix freely between religious and New Age-traditions (e.g., Wicca and Buddhism) (Salguero 2022: 2). This is in line with predictions made by other scholars who have also found that identity creation online, including changes to the concept of ritual itself, has only become more important since the pandemic (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 67; see also Helland and Kienzl 2022: 49–50). We will indeed be seeing an example of the mixing of Wiccan elements and Buddhism in one of the Reddit posts. In addition, one might well argue here that the proliferation of religions in the West and their availability in a ‘marketplace’, where people freely choose some elements while discarding others, does not make the Western world more secular, but instead more imbued with religious polytrophy more characteristic of Eastern cultures (see Carrithers 2000: 834 for a definition of the neologism ‘polytrophy’).

It might be worthwhile to consider the representation of Buddhism in Western popular culture, as an understanding of this aspect of Buddhism can also enhance our understanding of Buddhism’s current, modern situation in the West and explain some of its allure. Is Higgins onto something when he refers to Buddhism as a brand? According to Jørn Borup, “Buddhism has been transformed from an intellectual capital and practice path for the elite to an easily approachable mindset for the masses in which consumerism, commodification and mediatization are part of the neo-liberal market where spirituality is for sale” (Borup 2016: 41). Borup even states that many who might be recognized as secular Buddhists in the sense of Batchelor and Higgins might not even call themselves Buddhists. Borup refers to the Buddhism emerging from this transformation as “feel-good Buddhism”—that is, a detraditionalized, secular and in many ways ‘selfishly’ motivated Buddhism, where ideas and practices (e.g., mindfulness) are selected, transformed and used instrumentally” (Borup 2016: 53). Borup is of course not alone in making this observation, though his critical remarks may come across as overly cynical. Nevertheless, this is an additional reason why the internet is such an important space to study, since it is “for many a religious marketplace, encouraging users to seek out preferred information or establish personalized practices” (Campbell 2011: 77), and the

digital world is a place that especially “might give more room for personal articulations of religion” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 65).

A recent study on the use of the Buddha in American advertisements also reached similar conclusions. Advertisers strategically adopt images of the Buddha, and this reshapes Americans’ perceptions of Buddhism (Bao and Willis 2022: 45). Elements of Buddhist philosophy and thought are simply left out if they are undesirable or “incompatible with the structurally rooted yearning for personal happiness, individuality, and consumption” that characterizes the United States (Bao and Willis 2022: 46). Bao and Willis identify these ideas in particular as being related to ideas of karma, rebirth, and life as suffering, since these are incompatible with prevailing American beliefs. Both Borup’s article and the study by Bao and Willis go a long way in showing how Buddhism interacts with the secular cultures of those places (Borup mainly looks at Denmark; Bao and Willis at the United States) and show precisely what McMahan (2017: 114) means when he writes that “secularity serves as a driver of change and reconfiguration of religious belief, practice and interpretation”—and this is the case regardless of whether or not we are entirely comfortable with accepting that, or even if one can pose some uncomfortable ethical questions regarding appropriation and respect. It is simply hard to avoid that the Buddha and Buddhism in general are still exoticized and for many this makes it ‘cool’ and alluring. Thus, within these localized and identifiable Western cultures one sees Buddhism permeating society and culture in specific ways. But how does this function online in the non-localized spheres of the internet?

DIGITAL BUDDHISM

The practice of Buddhism online includes wholly new terms such as “E-Sangha” and “cybersangha” as well as new ways of looking at how religion is *done*. Some scholars have already noted “an affirmation and embrace of technology” among Buddhists that “signifies a discernable shift and in the dialogue between Buddhism and technology” (Gleig 2014: 19). The term itself—digital religion, or digital Buddhism—is also more complicated than just Buddhism on the internet, as on Reddit or Twitter. Digital religion can be consumed through unique forms such as video games, websites, e-mail, instant messaging services like Discord, and much else as well. I would argue here that the religious expressions we see on these platforms—and the ways in which they are conveyed, which can include seemingly ‘silly’ things like memes—do not necessarily have less ‘value’ than what we can observe in the ‘real’ world; indeed, for many it is possible that the internet becomes the only viable and real option for *genuine* religious expression, especially for people who are breaking with traditional norms in their societies (something other scholars also have noted, see Campbell 2011: 72; Campbell and Sheldon 2022: 77).

Gleig argues that online Buddhists represent a new generation of Buddhists that are “comfortable and fluent in both Buddhist and technological worlds (2014: 21).” This

development will only accelerate as more and more people around the world get regular and stable access to the internet and contribute to it. This should not come as a surprise: Buddhism has crossed geographical boundaries and has moved through cultural epochs throughout its history. That it should survive, change, and adapt to changes in our own time is hardly a shock, even if the ways in which it changes might be surprising.

Gleig's own study—the first of two to be focused on here—is on an online Buddhist media company called Buddhist Geeks, which records a weekly podcast, publishes a digital magazine component, and organizes annual conferences. In her article, Gleig stresses that the community lacks traditional hierarchical structures, so that it is not uncommon for teacher and students to mix freely with “no formal markers of authority such as special seating for teachers” (Gleig 2014: 19). The community emphasizes a “pragmatic and utilitarian approach to Buddhism” that they themselves refer to as “DIY Buddhism” (Gleig 2014: 19). The participants of the community draw liberally from different forms of Buddhism and there is no privileging of one single Buddhist tradition (Gleig 2014: 20). This new form of Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Buddhists in Asia and the West who are engaged in creating their own responses to the dominant problems and questions of Modernity (Gleig 2014: 25).

But while Gleig finds that the community continues many of the characteristics associated with modernism, especially in its scientific interpretation of Buddhism and the emphasis on meditative experience, she also finds a number of signs pointing to characteristics that are more associated with the postmodern than the modern. She argues here that there is a plurality of competing frameworks of meaning that indicates a postmodern sensibility in Buddhism as metanarrative or absolute system (Gleig 2014: 25–26). Postmodern religion is characterized by a refusal of rationalistic criteria as the exclusive standard of knowledge, a willingness to combine different frameworks of meaning, a consumer approach, and a relativistic attitude towards truth (Heelas 2008: 4–5). Those who participate in this Buddhist postmodernism are “responding to and reacting against already Westernized and modernized forms of Buddhism rather than classical forms of Asian Buddhism” (Gleig 2014: 29). It is important to keep Gleig's article in mind once the article proceeds to the case study of Reddit, as this understanding of postmodern Buddhism is highly relevant.

Like Gleig, Gandhi recognizes that Buddhism is always in flux and evolving, meaning that even central Buddhist ideas like dependent origination get reinterpreted and understood differently in different contexts (Gandhi 2019: 4; see also Batchelor 2012: 95 for a similar point). Gandhi examines first the virtual world of Second Life, which is a “3-Dimensional Internet-based virtual world that allows users to create a virtual representation, or avatar, to social network with others and collaboratively create their own virtual spaces” (Gandhi 2019: 5), and a Buddhist web-forum named the “E-Sangha”. Throughout her article, Gandhi shows how, even though the communities in question

exalt the individual over the community, this emphasis is still “placed within the larger context of collective discourse” (Gandhi 2019: 7).

Thus, for many users of Second Life, putting the robe of a monk on their avatar is not only an affirmation of their identity, but also makes it easier for Buddhist groups to “identify and connect with each other” (Gandhi 2019: 8). For many, this is a way to reconnect with the origins of Buddhism; far from perceiving it to be an evolutionary culmination of Buddhism, it is rather a return to its roots. Gandhi claims that Second Life provides a platform for the congregation of an online sangha. Thus, although the users create an avatar of themselves, placing themselves outside of the social context that may define them in the offline or actual world, avatars are constructed in a Buddhist framework that subjects them to new Buddhist identities (Gandhi 2019: 20).

Gandhi’s study of the E-Sangha forum is perhaps the most relevant one for this article, as an online forum is quite similar to Reddit. Gandhi notes that issues regarding authority and identity were more pronounced on the E-Sangha forum than in the Second Life virtual world. The E-Sangha forum was run by moderators who asserted ideological and technological authority over the users of the forum. These moderators set the tone and boundaries for the discussions. Interestingly, though the site claimed to be “an inclusive, nonsectarian discussion forum”, the website was anything but” (Gandhi 2019: 11). The goal of the forum was to go “back to the Buddhism of the Buddha”, which includes such rules as not being allowed to “disagree with doctrines considered Buddhist orthodoxy, which includes karma, post-mortem rebirth and no-self” (Gandhi 2019: 12). Gandhi even recounts the case of a Soto Zen monk who stated that the concept of rebirth should not be taken literally, which resulted in a swift ban from the forums. Recall that discussions of the New Kadampa school are not allowed on the /r/buddhism subreddit. This was also so for the E-Sangha forum; discussions of New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) and all other proponents of Dolgyal/Shugden, Dark Zen, True Buddha School, and Aro Ter/Flaming Jewel Sangha were all prohibited and resulted in bans (Gandhi 2019: 14). A similar kind of discord exists here as we saw it in Higgins earlier.

Both Virtual World and the E-Sangha forum share many of the characteristics of Buddhist modernism. There is “an emphasis on laypeople over the monastic community, universality over the particular geographical locations” and a focus on “the original Buddhism of Sakyamuni Buddha” (Gandhi 2019: 20). However, while Gandhi does not write about this in her article, there are also signs of postmodernism as defined above in the E-Sangha forum as well. They created rules and moderated their forum on the basis of a *rejection* of Buddhist modernism—regardless of whether or not their understanding of traditional forms of Buddhism was ‘correct’ or not. That is to say, by rejecting the Buddhist modernity, they existed more in conversation with *it* rather than traditional Buddhism, and in one fell swoop rejected essentially everything except for what they saw as the essential teachings of the Buddha. There is a kind of essentialism in all of this, which may very well be reminiscent of the secular Buddhism of Higgins and

Batchelor. These examples highlight the multiple and complex ways in which forms of Buddhism are in conversation with one another and react to one another, both in the on-line and offline worlds. And as Gandhi (2019: 21) writes, “Online religion is an integral part of modern Buddhist movements, and exemplifies the ongoing discourse regarding Buddhist identity, authority, and authenticity.”

BUDDHISM ON REDDIT

The posts on /r/Buddhism provide users with an enormous wealth of information in the sidebars of the page, and for users that are logged in and part of the community, there is a part where they select a ‘flair’. This flair will indicate next to their username, whenever they post something in the subreddit, which branch of Buddhism they identify with or belong to. The list of flairs is long and also quite revealing and includes options like ‘pragmatic dharma’, ‘academic’, and even ‘Christian Buddhist’. There are guidelines for posting, where the most interesting rule has already been mentioned.³ It is also possible to filter the content on the page from the sidebar, so that you only see posts from a specific topic.⁴ A little further down one can find links to other Buddhist-related subreddits, many dedicated to the specific Buddhist branches from the flair-options mentioned above. As far as I have been able to determine, /r/Buddhism is the largest by quite some margin. As mentioned earlier, the analysis will begin by looking at a collection of posts including pictures of altars, as they are quite revealing in their contents and details, especially when examining the users more closely.

The first post to be examined is titled ‘An improvised altar [work in progress],⁵ by a user with the name ‘devadatta3’. It includes a small statue of a seated Buddha, sitting on top of a few small, thin books. The topmost is an Italian translation of the *The Liturgy of Nichiren Shu*, indicating that the person is familiar with and probably drawn to or is a follower of the form of Buddhism associated with the Japanese prophet Nichiren (1222-82) (Gethin 1998: 265). However, the user’s flair is the Mahayana flair, and the user is also active in another, more specific Buddhist subreddit, namely /r/pureland, which is dedicated to Pure Land Buddhism. In this post, the person has placed a glass of water and an apple in front of the Buddha, presumably as an offering, along with what appears to be incense lying next to it. One can also see some electronic device to the left, though

3. The semantics of the rule about New Kadampa Tradition is fascinating: “Posts with New Kadampa Tradition-supporting content will be removed.” The implication seems to be that they are allowed to talk about and discuss it, but only in a hostile way.

4. There are 25 such filters, and again it can be useful to list all of them: news; sutta/sutra; academic; dharma talk; question; request; politics; meta; Theravada; Mahayana; Vajrayana; early Buddhism; fluff; opinion; video; article; interview; anecdote; announcement; audio; iconography; misc.; practice; book; life advice.

5. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/zbc3z0/an_improvised_altar_work_in_progress/

it is hard to make out exactly what it is. There are not many comments on this post besides one user saying “Love it :)”, and it received some 50 upvotes as of the time of writing.⁶

A closer look at the user’s profile reveals that, besides taking part in active discussions about various Buddhist topics in both /r/Buddhism and /r/pureland, the user has posted quite a few other altar pictures. In one of them, the user has posted a new, updated altar based on feedback received from other users in other altar posts they have made.⁷ This altar is much more ‘minimalistic’, only containing what looks like a *thangka* (a sacred picture, commonly used for meditation) of (a) Buddha with a water bowl in front of it. The books, apple, incense and electronic device from the first picture have all been removed. What is particularly fascinating here is the *active* identity formation—recall that the user themselves calls this a “work in progress”—with changes being made on the basis of feedback from the community, a community that consists of people representing a huge variety of different conceptions of Buddhism. This is a perfect example of how identity creation has become an active phenomenon on the web, where places like Reddit allow for “new spaces of expressing identity outside the control of parents and teachers” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 61). At the same time, it highlights how identity formation is a deeply “social process, deeply anchored in the individual’s need to stay connected, to find meaning, and to act in everyday life” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 67). This point becomes even more pronounced when looking at the user’s post history and finding that they are gay. In one comment in a thread made by a user called ‘Tendai-Student’, which is interesting in itself to explore as the thread is a long refutation of “misconceptions about Buddhism”, ‘devadatta3’ writes that “I’m a gay person, and virtually there in NO traditional religion that accepts me and loves me as I am. There’s always been a little or big BUT somewhere for us. So I get the point of your view about the issue, I really do.”⁸

This quote is only part of a larger discussion that the user had with another user in the thread. We should take note of these interactions. As Campbell has noted, the internet may create new opportunities for self-expression of belief and religious lifestyle practice that do not exist in traditional religious contexts. This can be particularly the case for people who belong to minority groups. The internet can offer new modes of

6. All users can either upvote or downvote posts or comments. Upvoted threads and comments mean many people have essentially given a thumbs up to the thread or comment, and they receive increased visibility as a result. It is possible to sort comments in threads (and threads themselves) based on both most upvoted as well as controversial (i.e., the comment has received many upvotes as well as downvotes, indicating disagreements), new posts, and old posts, among others, these being the most relevant.

7. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/116vdd2/updated_altar_thanks_for_all_of_your_advice/

8. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12fhza2/misconceptions_about_buddhism_online_and_on/jfkgng2/

interaction and possibilities for constructing religious identities, particularly for “people who lack such opportunities in the local or offline context” (Campbell 2011: 72). The example of ‘devadatta3’ is quite illustrative of the possibilities of religious expression and religion online in general. There is a pick-and-mix approach to religion, where the user can select “elements for presenting a self from the plurality of religious symbols circulated online” (Lövheim and Lundmark 2022: 45), while being a part of a “loosely bound dynamic network” (Campbell and Sheldon 2022: 74) where the users engage with the internet as a “‘meaning resource’ used by spiritual seekers in contemporary society in religious orientation and formation practices” (Campbell 2011: 82). For this user, Reddit and /r/Buddhism (along with various other Buddhism-related subreddits) clearly play an essential role for the person’s navigating of identity and religious belief, sharing their religiosity with others in a dynamic context with no clear religious authority.

The second post to be examined underscores these points further.⁹ Here, we see again a seated Buddha statue—a typical motif in general for pictures of altars shared on the site—placed on a small, elevated platform with a turtle to its right (perhaps a reference to the Lotus Sutta) and what seems to be a laughing Buddha to its left. There is a teapot and a glass on the table, as well as a plate with a string of mala beads on it. Underneath the platform are some rocks (possibly crystals) and a lamp. At the left-most edge of the altar itself, right-most for the viewer, is a stack of three books. The top-most book is one by Thich Nhat Hanh, an Italian translation of *The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion*. The original poster reveals in the comments that the two others are the Lotus Sutra and Thich Nhat Hanh’s commentary on the Amithaba Sutra. The poster has also hung up a rainbow flag behind the altar, and a commenter in the thread writes that this is “pretty awesome because its always been a Buddhist symbol anyways.” The original poster replies that they did not know this and that the flag “is there cause of a coincidence.”

Examining the user’s post history more closely reveals that, in addition to their active participation in other subreddits such as /r/meditation, he is also gay—or at least not straight. In fact, the user posted a thread asking the community, “Buddhist friends, what’s your opinion on LGBT community?”¹⁰ It received a great deal of comments and discussion, where the most upvoted comment (448 upvotes at the time of writing) is emblematic for the majority of posts, sharing its sentiment: “They are no different to anyone else, we are all in the same cycle of dukkha and should not treat anyone differently.” In another thread in which another user asks the subreddit community “Can gay people become buddhist/ what does buddishm think of gay ppl?”, he commented: “I’m not straight and I’m Buddhist. Buddhism doesn’t focus on this, sexuality doesn’t matter.

9. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/z1ud67/my_simple_altar/

10. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/yu22yt/buddhist_friends_whats_your_opinion_on_lgbt/

Rather, hate is forbidden in Buddhism and love for all beings is recommended.”¹¹ What makes this a particularly interesting example is that the user is only 15 years old. This is revealed in another thread he created, asking the community, “Can I attain Enlightenment if I’m not a monk?”¹² In a comment in his own thread, he writes that “I hope I achieve enough discipline in my life. I’m 15 years old though and I’m passing a tough period I hope I get well soon so I can have a better practice.”¹³ Several others in the community chime in and relate their own experiences, with one user, now 25, writing that “I first started my practice at 12, and have passed through many tough periods. I had a lot to explore, and naughty things to get into before I could set them aside and devote myself to practice.”

In the altar picture that we began this example with, one user writes that “part of the Buddhist path is acknowledging ourselves where we are—if part of that is our queerness then we can celebrate that as authentically ourselves. The Buddha would never want us to be anything we aren’t, and taught the path to actualizing who we really are.” This openness about LGBTQ matters engaging with Buddhist thought is quite remarkable, and it gives fascinating insight into how people understand and engage with Buddhism today. The emphasis here is also on finding what is “authentically ourselves” and “actualizing who we really are.” This again emphasizes the aforementioned point that Lövheim and Lundmark (2022: 61) have made about the internet being particularly effective places for young people to not only express but also figure out their own identities. Lövheim (2012: 152) has also stressed that young people are not simply “passive recipients of religious socialization in formal as well as informal settings” but are rather “active participants who exercise a high degree of ‘critical autonomy’ in decisions about religious beliefs and actions.” It could be argued here that Reddit provides an extraordinary platform for just this, and it is useful to reflect over the uniqueness of this in the context of history: a 15 year old gay, Italian Buddhist engaging with and discussing Buddhist doctrine and practice with other self-identified Buddhists (at least mostly) that could technically be from anywhere in the world, of any age, of any gender, and any background. If we consider the fact that Reddit is only one example of this, and that the internet is *full* of such cases, it stands to reason that the affect it is having on Buddhism and the development of Buddhism must be enormous—even if complicated and unpredictable.

11. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/11u2l0v/can_gay_people_become_buddhist_what_does_buddishm/jco7g1o/

12. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12ebuq8/can_i_attain_enlightenment_if_im_not_a_monk/jfb2no1/

13. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12ebuq8/can_i_attain_enlightenment_if_im_not_a_monk/jfb2no1/

One final example sheds further light upon the complex processes of religious bricolage and identity formation on the internet.¹⁴ It is difficult to make out all the details on the picture, as it is quite pixelated and of lower quality than the others. What is particularly interesting here is that the top-most statue is of Ganesh—a Hindu deity not typically associated with Buddhism. The Buddha is placed below Ganesh, with beads around him, with another set of beads lying next to it. There is also a pestle and mortar on the table, with what appears to be a crystal lying in front of the Buddha statue. Of the posts examined in this article, this one is the one that most clearly exemplifies the mixing of religious ideas: Ganesh, typically associated with Hinduism; the Buddha with beads; and a crystal, more associated with New Age. The top comment on the thread is also, of course, “can I has samadhi?”—a reference to the title of the post, “My tuxedo kitty gaining some merit while my wife and I meditate”, and the infamous ‘can I has’ cat meme that was so popular on the internet in the mid to late first decade of the 2000s.

But looking into the user’s post history further, a whole host of interesting things beyond the religious mixing appear. It becomes clear that the person is from the United States, and that neither is this user straight, but in fact is a “late blooming lesbian”.¹⁵ She also actively takes part in other subreddits where she makes it clear that she is also autistic, posting in subreddits like /r/autisticwithADHD and /r/autisminwomen. She also actively takes part in other religious subreddits, such as /r/religion. In one such post, she writes that she is an atheist in a reply to the thread “Why are some religions called ‘religions’ and others religions practiced in the ancient times are now called mythologies?” Her reply: “Because modern people believe in New Skydaddy, and all the other Old Skydaddies in the past were Wrong, and thus myths. But not the one now. That one is real. 🙄”¹⁶

She is a particularly active poster on /r/Buddhism/ and she mentions in one post that she has been a practicing Buddhist for 15 years.¹⁷ In addition, in a thread made by a different user on /r/Buddhism, asking if “Tattoo of Dharma Wheel offensive?”, she reveals that “I have a dhamma wheel tattooed on my forearm! And part of the metta sutta above it, and the words metta/paṇṇa on my wrists, and a lotus on my chest!”¹⁸ This is, again, quite a remarkable example of a person engaging with Buddhism online and

14. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/yo5wrf/my_tuxedo_kitty_gaining_some_merit_while_my_wife

15. https://www.reddit.com/r/AutismInWomen/comments/119m7wd/my_autistic_husband_leans_on_me_for_everything/j9n4ocs/

16. https://www.reddit.com/r/religion/comments/12gxzh8/why_are_some_religions_called_religions_and/jfmp826/?context=3

17. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12fh9yf/working_on_lifelong_maladaptive_reaction/jfgobtg/

18. https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/12go5g8/tattoo_of_dharma_wheel_offensive/jfl834o/?context=3

forming their identity with the help of digital tools. Reddit thus allows for the participation of a neurodivergent (autistic), lesbian woman, adding to the discourse on the site, and highlights the plethora of different and variegated individuals who are contributing to shaping and forming modern-day Buddhism. The juxtaposition of religious imagery, infused with pop-culture meme references, with no gatekeepers around to make it less visible or hide it entirely, is an extraordinary example of “lived religion” where “many religious symbols and narratives become freed from their traditional structures and dogmas and so become tools for reconstructing spiritual meaning in daily life” (Campbell 2011: 66–67). In this sense, and this user is a good example of this, Reddit—and the internet itself—become, in many ways, just another tool in the toolbox “people take on board in the ongoing process of negotiating the tension between the individual and the group, the expectations of the tradition, and benefits associated with personal preferences and freedoms” (Campbell 2011: 84).

BUDDHIST IDENTITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND AUTHORITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

We can now return to the questions posed in the beginning of the article: What kinds of Buddhism do we see reflected on Reddit? What kinds of discourses exist, and what ideas and concerns are prominently debated and discussed? Does the type of Buddhism(s) we see indicate modernist or postmodernist sensibilities? And finally, what can we gauge from Reddit about Buddhist identity, authenticity, and authority in the twenty-first century?

The Buddhism we see on Reddit—at least on /r/Buddhism—is diverse, complicated, and complex, and oftentimes downright confusing. There is such a proliferation of opinions, views, and other expressions of belief(s) and faith that it is simply impossible to pigeon-hole and categorize it all accurately and precisely. In many ways, it is to a large extent a confusing jumble where it is hard to make out exactly what the essence of things is. There are differing degrees of certainty of doctrinal points and degrees of belief; discussions, debates, and disagreements appear welcome. Some are clearly more in the camp of individualism, secularity, and reason, leaning towards ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ Buddhism. Others emphasize the communal aspect. The sharing of pictures of private altars in their homes indicates a need for community, while their other posts are often more individualistic, where the users are trying to figure out aspects of their own identity. The Buddhism that we see on /r/Buddhism is, then, a *mélange* of all kinds of opinions and thoughts and ideas—from deeply traditionalist to those that simply pick out what they like about Buddhism and use it to cope with the human predicament. In that sense, the Buddhism we see on Reddit carries with it the hallmarks of what Gleig calls postmodern, but that does not mean that there are no opposing voices visible on the site.

What is important to emphasize here is that this is all a two-way-street: these elements all reflect the real world while simultaneously being reflected *in* the real world—these are *real* people doing *real* religion. As Campbell (2011: 82) puts it, “Offline meta-narratives and goals inform what they see as the purpose of the internet or how they justify their engagement with it.” In the case of the examples presented in this article, these goals can be many and particularly related to identity and navigating the world as part of a minority or marginalized group. Media play important roles in forming understandings of social reality, and people engaged with these media representations are not all passive consumers of media, but are also engaged and critical citizens (Lövheim 2012: 158–161). The internet—and in this case Reddit—appears as what Campbell calls a new tool in the toolbox “of new possibilities for religious expression and connectedness that enhance individuals’ religious lifestyles and allow for the creation of new forms of hybridized religion” (Campbell 2011: 79–80). One must reckon with technologies being used in different social and cultural contexts and in the everyday lives of users, which “requires considerations of aspects such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and even geopolitics.” (Campbell and Sheldon 2022: 80). This openness about LGBT matters, and sites like Reddit providing a space for these minority groups to discuss and find information, is likely not a trend that is going to disappear as more and more people have the freedom to explore sites like Reddit. It should be kept in mind here that there might be many people who browse the site in similar predicaments as the examples taken up this article, but who do *not* post their questions or even have a user profile on the site. Thus, there is also an unseen influence in these examples that is impossible to measure or know about. In the examples discussed above, we see precisely how the internet—or this new tool—allows for “broader articulations of religious identities, such as the stories of women, gay people and other groups whose voices have been marginalized in religious communities throughout history” (Lövheim 2012: 163).

This is in large part allowed on Reddit since it seems the moderators of the subreddit allow most kinds of discussions and topics and have lenient rules. The ‘gatekeepers’ of any kind of ‘authentic Buddhism’ as such are therefore missing, which allows for remarkable variation in what is posted and debated. “Authority and expertise,” writes Lövheim (2012: 160), “is distributed among many rather than attached to a certain position or institution”, and the debates and discourses online are quality-controlled “through constant, interactive peer-review rather than controlled through certain institutions or fixed, formal procedures and regulations.” This, of course, is highly characteristic of what Gleig has referred to as postmodern. As Helland and Kienzl (Helland and Kienzl 2022: 45) put it, “in contemporary Western society, there is a great deal of individual religiosity or ‘patchwork’ religion, and although the ‘official’ position may be that online rituals are not authentic, community members may choose to disagree.” Helland and Kienzl are talking about rituals in particular here, but that goes for any kind of religious expression online. Since rituals are “woven into the cultural meaning-making system”, usually with

“engagement within a particular environment” (Helland and Kienzl 2022: 50), there may be room to view the sharing of pictures of altars on Reddit as a fundamental part of the ritual aspect of altars; this is especially the case for the first example examined, where the poster continually posts updated altar pictures as a ‘work in progress.’ What is especially tantalizing here is that the ritual aspects are being changed in real time without any real religious authority figures involved—or, if they are, their voices are only part of the tapestry—and the arena of religious expressions has in large part become “democratized” (Cheong 2022: 91).

With this democratization of authority, the scope of what counts as ‘authentic Buddhism’ is also much broader. Instead, /r/Buddhism gives us a glimpse of the lived religion online, where people can select, assemble, and present an identity, and in many cases this is done with the help of the community on the site. Thus, the Buddhism that many people encounter in their lives, for instance through the focus on mindfulness and what some have called ‘feel-good-Buddhism’, or through the ‘brandification’ of Buddhism via popular culture, can satisfy their curiosity by finding sites like Reddit and seeing these types of discussions. And for many, far from dismissing what they see, they might instead do the exact opposite: embrace what they find as yet another tool for spiritual improvement, personal growth, or simply for the sake of belonging and community. From the examples provided in this article, it is clear that /r/Buddhism has the potential to be a significant resource that can be used in religious orientation and identity formation. The users actively engage in discussions, debates, and the sharing of altars and opinions, actively participating in meaning-making and identity creation.

It is unlikely that things will get any *less* digital with time. Advancements in artificial intelligence, robotics and gaming change the ways we connect and relate to others in the digital age (Campbell and Sheldon 2022: 83). How this will impact the online/digital landscape is an exciting question. It is interesting to imagine the responses AI might give to equivalent questions that many of the users in the examples in this article posed on Reddit. In any case, “the modernization of Buddhism is not a process of homogenization, but it is a complicated process of hybridization, involving multiple flows, and discourses that is resulting in a proliferation of Buddhisms adapted to contemporary global contexts” (Harding et al. 2020: 7). /r/Buddhism is a perfect example of this—non-homogenized, hybrids galore, multiple and complicated flows and directions, and tremendous complexity in terms of discourse, in a completely new and unique global context. On top of that, Reddit offers remarkable potential in terms of insight into the lived religions of marginalized groups and minorities.

This article has had, however, a relatively narrow and limited focus, with only a few example posts from /r/Buddhism forming the corpus for a brief case study. In the world of Buddhism on Reddit, this is not even getting one’s ankles wet. Besides studying the other explicitly Buddhist subreddits that have been mentioned elsewhere in the article, beyond the biggest in /r/Buddhism, it could also be possible to look at /r/meditation,

which has a remarkable 1, 492,230 members at the time of writing, or /r/mindfulness, with 1,172,382 members. Studying these online and digital spaces of religion is worthwhile and important, as it gives serious insight into how people understand their own beliefs, transform religious ideas and concepts, and how people generate and create their religious identities. What we find is the extremely complex ways in which Buddhism exists online and in the digital world, and to restate the introduction, we find a fluid, living religion in flux with a vibrant online presence.

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NÅR SPIRITUALITET BLIR KROPPSLIG PERSONER I DET NORSKE ALTERNATIVMILJØET FORTELLER OM OPPVÅKNINGSOPPLEVELSER OG PSYKOLOGISK TRANSFORMASJON

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual awakening is becoming a common phenomenon in alternative spiritual communities and is no longer exclusive to a small elite of religious saints and disciples. There is limited research on spiritual experiences outside religious contexts in the Nordic countries. While relevant theological research exists on religious experiences in Christian contexts, much of the research on alternative spirituality is based on outsider perspectives that miss out on the deeper psychological phenomena experienced by “spiritual, but not religious” individuals. This article is based on three qualitative interviews with individuals in contemporary spiritual communities in Norway who have experienced spontaneous spiritual awakenings and speak openly about this. Focus is on the experience of altered states of consciousness, intense feelings of love, and physical energies in the body, which lead to permanent psychological transformation. Starting with a review of relevant Norwegian and Swedish research in the field, we apply a theoretical approach drawn from humanistic and transpersonal psychology to make sense of our interviewees’ experiences, and then discuss how these cases of embodied spiritual transformation differ from religious conversion and are better understood in terms of psychological concepts of trauma healing, self-actualization and human potential.

KEYWORDS

Spiritual awakening – humanistic psychology – transpersonal psychology – kundalini – peak experiences – dark night of the soul – yoga

INNLEDNING

Studentavisen ved Universitetet i Oslo, *Universitas*, hadde 31. mars 2022 et tankevekkende førstesideoppslag: «Thea og Celia var studenter på vei mot vanlige liv: Så fikk de en spirituell oppvåkning». I intervjuet forteller Celia Pilskog Stasvik om sin spirituelle oppvåkning, som begynte med at hun skrev bacheloroppgave om tankekraft. Så begynte hun å legge merke til synkroniteter (C. G. Jungs (1952) begrep for meningsfulle sammentreff uten kjent årsak), og merket hvordan hun tiltrakk seg positive og negative ting hun tenkte på. For eksempel kunne hun tenke på en person, og så møte den personen «helt tilfeldig» dagen etter. Hun forteller at hun hadde mange magiske opplevelser. Hun begynte å stole på det hun opplevde, og snakke åpent om spirituelle ting til vennene sine. Reaksjonene ble derimot negative: «Det har vært helt vilt negativt. Folk har tatt avstand fra meg, og blitt redd for at jeg har blitt gal.»

Spirituell oppvåkning har lenge vært et fenomen man bare snakket om i «alternative» miljøer. At studentavisen ved Universitetet i Oslo, der det rasjonelle verdensbildet hersker, skriver om det på førstesiden tyder på at oppvåkning begynner å bli utbredt. Magnus Støre, statsministerens sønn, forteller i *Vårt Land* (2022) om sine spirituelle opplevelser. Han hadde depresjon og angst som ungdom, og var spirituelle søkende inntil han hadde et vendepunkt da han møtte en indisk yogamester. Støre er inspirert av indisk filosofi, men mer opptatt av praktisk erfaring enn av hinduistisk og buddhistisk religion. Støre understreker at alle er åndelige, og det viktigste er å finne ut hva som er riktig for en selv. I 2021 ble han intervjuet på *Skavlan* og ønsket å snakke om spiritualitet, men fikk mest oppmerksomhet for opplevelsen han hadde på psykedelisk sopp. Senere fant han ut at man kan få lignende opplevelser uten psykoaktive stoffer.

Fortellinger om opplevelser med spirituell oppvåkning er utbredt i «alternative» miljøer og i yogamiljøet. De fleste spirituelle oppvåkninger oppstår spontant (Corneille og Luke 2021; Taylor 2017: 105; Taylor 2018: 133), og ikke nødvendigvis som følge av yoga- eller meditasjonspraksis, men mange søker seg til yogamiljøet eller alternative spirituelle miljøer fordi de møter forståelse for hva de har opplevd her (Johansson 2018: 26). Målet med å praktisere yoga og meditasjon i indisk tradisjon er å oppnå «opplysning» (moksha eller nirvana) og det er dette fenomenet som i samtidsspiritualiteten kalles «oppvåkning». Hensikten med denne artikkelen er å belyse hvordan dette fenomenet oppleves av personer i det norske alternativmiljøet, og diskutere hvordan det kan forstås i lys av teoretiske perspektiver fra både religionsvitenskap og humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi.

PROBLEMSTILLING OG PERSPEKTIV

Artikkelen bygger på en empirisk studie av spirituell oppvåkning, basert på kvalitative intervjuer med tre personer som forteller om sine opplevelser med fenomenet. De har felles at de ikke deltar i organisert religiøsitet, men alle deltar i «alternative» spirituelle miljøer. De deltar i varierende grad i ulike praksiser hentet fra yoga, nysjamanisme og New Age, ofte i kombinasjon. I denne artikkelen ligger fokuset vårt ikke på praksisene de deltar i, men i de indre og subjektive kroppslige opplevelsene av spirituell oppvåkning og den psykologiske transformasjonen som respondentene opplever i en oppvåkingsprosess, som ofte ledsages av å oppleve paranormale eller magiske fenomener som forandrer personens virkelighetsoppfatning og oppfatning av seg selv. Vi undersøker hvordan det oppleves når folk utenfor en religiøs kontekst får en spirituell oppvåkning, og drøfter hvorvidt det er primært et følelsesmessig eller kognitivt skifte og på hvilke måter det ligner på religiøs omvendelse. Med andre ord, om det utgjør en psykologisk transformasjon eller en endring i trosforestillinger, og hvordan det bidrar til psykisk helse. Vi diskuterer det i relasjon til skandinavisk religionsvitenskapelig (Henriksen og Pabst 2013; Johansson 2018; Nygaard med flere 2017; Olsson 2018) og religionspsykologisk (Anne Austad 2014; Engedal 2014; La Cour 2014) forskning, samt amerikansk og britisk humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi (Greenwell 1990, 2018; Grof og Grof 1990; Taylor 2017, 2018).

En intensjon med artikkelen er å bringe innenfra- og utenfra-perspektiver i dialog med hverandre. En utfordring med å studere, eller generelt snakke om, subjektive opplevelser av spirituelle og paranormale fenomener er hvordan disse kan formidles til andre som ikke deler slike opplevelser. Når respondenter forteller om kroppslige fornemmelser og opplevelser av psykologisk transformasjon, risikerer opplevelsene å bli redusert til et spørsmål om trosoppfatninger (Taylor 2017). Å ta respondentene på alvor krever en dialog mellom ulike virkelighetsoppfatninger, mellom et innenfra-perspektiv og et utenfra-perspektiv (Rodriguez og Stokke 2019). Vår tilnærming til oversettelsesproblematikken er å først bruke teoretiske perspektiver fra humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi (Greenwell 1990, 2018; Grof og Grof 1990; Taylor 2017, 2018), som har som intensjon å ta spirituelle opplevelser på alvor som empiriske fenomener, som et innenfra-perspektiv som systematiserer og kategoriserer respondentenes opplevelser, før vi diskuterer funnene i lys av religionsvitenskapelig (Hanky 2021; Nygaard med flere 2017; Olsson 2018) og religionspsykologisk (Engedal 2014; James 1907; La Cour 2014) forskning. De to ulike virkelighetsoppfatningene gjenspeiles i en vitenskapsteoretisk uenighet om hvorvidt subjektive opplevelser utgjør reelle empiriske fenomener (Engedal 2014: 50–51; Rodriguez og Stokke 2019: 248–251). Fordi transpersonlig psykologi betrakter dem som sådan, anses denne fagtradisjonen av mange som uvitenskapelig (Arne Austad 2014). Lenger ned i artikkelen vil vi kort drøfte dette, men for en grundig epistemologisk diskusjon om innenfra og utenfra-perspektiver i studiet av spirituelle erfaringer henviser vi leseren til Rodriguez og Stokke (2019), der vi drøfter rasjonalitets- og relati-

vismedebatten i antropologisk og religionssosiologisk faghistorie i lys av postmoderne, postkoloniale og feministiske perspektiver.

Artikkelen er delt i tre. I teoridelen vil vi først redegjøre for skillet mellom religion og spiritualitet, før vi drøfter teoretiske perspektiver fra henholdsvis teologi og religionsvitenskap, og fra humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi. Den empiriske delen starter med en metodebeskrivelse fulgt av presentasjoner av funn fra intervjuene i lys av transpersonlig psykologi, før vi i analysedelen drøfter disse funnene i henhold til relevant religionsvitenskapelig forskning.

TEORETISKE PERSPEKTIVER

ET ANALYTISK SKILLE MELLOM RELIGION OG SPIRITUALITET

Kalvig (2017) påpeker at norske religionsvitere har en tendens til å forstå samtidsspiritualitet som religion, mens Løøv (2018) skriver at religionsvitenskapens tradisjonelle forståelse av religion som organisert tro ikke nødvendigvis passer for samtidsspiritualitet. Hun er kritisk til den overflatiske og negative tilnærming til spiritualitet som finnes hos for eksempel Steve Bruce (2017) som bruker en religionsforståelse basert på protestantisk kristendom som målestokk for hva som er religion. Deltakelse i organisert aktivitet og «tro» som kriterium gjør at yoga og meditasjon fremstilles som rent sekulære fenomener som er uinteressante for religionsfaget. Han overser at spiritualitet nettopp er forskjellig fra organisert religion. Løøv etterlyser nytenkning der samtidens empiriske fenomener utfordrer fagets definisjoner og teorier (2018: 94–95).

Heelas og Woodheads (2005) skille mellom religion og spiritualitet kan være nyttig å bruke i større grad i en norsk forskningskontekst. De definerer «spiritualitet» som en mer individorientert form for åndelighet som særlig fokuserer på indre fenomener som bevissthet, følelser og selvutvikling – i motsetning til «religion» (2005: 4). Det innebærer ikke nødvendigvis et skille mellom tradisjonell religion og samtidsspiritualitet som gjensidig utelukkende kategorier, men kan kanskje heller forstås som to ulike analytiske dimensjoner, som viser til henholdsvis ytre observerbare fenomenene, og subjektive, psykologiske fenomener. Samtidsspiritualitet vektlegger det indre som individuell selvutvikling, bevissthet, og terapeutisk spiritualitet, over det ytre, som blant annet organisasjonsformer og hellige skrifter som har stått sentralt i tradisjonell religion. Dermed er begrepet «nyreligiøsitet» noe misvisende, og vi kunne med fordel brukt det svenske nyåndelighet (nyandlighet) eller engelske samtidsspiritualitet (contemporary spirituality). Engelsk bruker også spiritualitet som universell betegnelse på en menneskelig dimensjon av åndelighet, uavhengig av om folk er ateister, religiøse eller alternative (Rodriguez og Stokke 2019).

De fleste alternative spirituelle og folk i yogamiljøet identifiserer seg ikke med religion, men eksplisitt som «spirituell, men ikke religiøs» (Olsson 2018). Alternativ behandling og terapi, og yoga og meditasjon, som har blitt allment, oppfattes heller ikke

som religion (Løøv 2021), men de fleste alternative terapeuter har et spiritielt livssyn. Yoga har endret seg fra å bli ansett som indisk religiøs praksis til å bli sekulær treningsform, metode for selvutvikling, eller spirituell praksis for ulike mennesker. Hanky (2021) viser hvordan yoga samtidig markedsføres som velvære for allmennheten og som praksis for oppvåkning i alternativmiljøet.

SKANDINAVISK FORSKNING PÅ SPIRITUELLE ERFARINGER

Oppvåkningsopplevelser faller innunder en større kategori av spirituelle erfaringer, og ledsages ofte av paranormale fenomener. Selv om denne artikkelen fokuserer på indre psykologiske prosesser og ikke på paranormale fenomener som sådan, er det relevant å se på hvordan beslektede og til dels overlappende spirituelle opplevelser har blitt forstått i teologisk forskning, som Henriksen og Pabst (2013) og Nygaard, Austad og Kleven (2017). Anne Austad definerer ekstraordinære religiøse erfaringer som opplevelser av paranormale, transcendent, religiøse og spirituelle fenomen, og skriver at en tredjedel til halvparten, kanskje opptil 70 %, av befolkningen i USA og Storbritannia har hatt mystiske erfaringer (Anne Austad 2014: 232–233). Ekstraordinære opplevelser omfatter mystiske erfaringer, høydepunktsopplevelser, paranormale fenomener som telepati, nær-døden opplevelser, og spontan helbredelse (Anne Austad 2014). I dag snakkes det mer åpent om slike fenomener i sammenheng med fremveksten av alternativ spiritualitet, men fortsatt er det utbredt skepsis i både sekulære og kristne miljøer, fordi opplevelsene bryter med etablerte religiøse og vitenskapelige paradigmer (Henriksen og Pabst 2013). Austad mener at mystiske bevissthetstilstander er vanskelig å forstå for folk som ikke selv har erfart det, fordi opplevelsen er mer følelsesmessig enn intellektuell (Anne Austad 2014: 235).

Henriksen og Pabst (Henriksen og Pabst 2013) undersøker hvordan kristne som opplever healing, kontakt med døde, og visjoner av engler, tolker opplevelsene i henhold til kristne og sekulære rammer. Analytisk skiller de mellom empirisk erfaring og kulturelle tolkninger, og dette er et nyttig skille også for oppvåkningsopplevelser, som kan tolkes inn i både religiøse, sekulære eller spirituelle forståelsesrammer. Det diskuteres om erfaringene er universelle på tvers av livssyn, og så tolkes inn i kulturelle forståelser, eller om opplevelsene er kulturelt formet. Forfatterne fant at opplevelsene kommer uventet og ubedt, spontant og uforberedt. Opplevelsene bryter med respondentenes verdensbilder, noe som antyder at de ikke er kulturelt skapt.

Johanssons (2018) empiriske studie fra Sverige viser at 39 % av befolkningen «tror på» paranormale fenomener som bryter med konsensusvirkeligheten. Studien fokuserer på fenomener som kontakt med døde, telepati, liv etter døden, reinkarnasjon, visjoner av ånder og engler, prekognisjon og healing. De kalles paranormale fordi de ikke kan forklares innenfor det rådende vitenskapelige paradigmet. Forfatteren knytter analysen til den subjektive vendingen (Heelas og Woodhead 2005) der mennesker bruker personlig erfaring i stedet for religiøs troslære som sannhetskriterium. Paranormale fenomen

er vanlig blant ungdom som bruker intuisjon, kroppen og hjertet for å få kunnskap (Johansson 2018). Tidligere forskning antyder at paranormale erfaringer er mer vanlig blant kvinner, men Johanssons informanter ser ikke på intuisjon og følelser som typisk kvinnelig.

Mange av Johanssons (2018) respondenter uttrykte at de er redde for å bli ansett som «flummiga». Dette svenske begrepet kan kanskje oversettes til «svevende» på norsk, og brukes gjerne negativt om de som snakker om fenomener som strider mot rådende ideer om rasjonalitet. Flere har opplevd ubehag når andre er skeptiske og ikke tar erfaringene på alvor. De er derfor forsiktige med hvem de prater med om uforklarlige fenomen, men sier det har blitt lettere å snakke om dette i senere år, som følge av større åpenhet i samfunnet. Alle respondentene har egne erfaringer som bekreftes av andre, ikke en overlevert «tro». De yngre tenker at fremtidens naturvitenskap vil kunne forklare fenomenene, de henviser til vitenskapelige studier og bruker vitenskapelig språk (Johansson 2018: 13–14).

PSYKOLOGISKE PERSPEKTIVER PÅ SPIRITUELL OPPVÅKNING

Psykologifaget har studert religiøse opplevelser og endrede bevissthetstilstander siden William James (1907), C. G. Jung (1952, 1975) og Abraham Maslow (1970), men det er uenighet om hvorvidt subjektive spirituelle opplevelser skal anses som reelle empiriske fenomen. Mens humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi bruker et innenfra-perspektiv som tar spirituelle fenomener på alvor som empiriske fenomen, dominerer utenfra-perspektivet i både psykologi og religionspsykologi som er opptatt av det objektivt observerbare og målbare (Engedal 2014).

Den norske religionspsykologen Arne Austad (2014: 151) skriver at humanistisk psykologi kritiseres som «uvitenskapelig» fordi den gir innpass for holistiske tilnærminger fra alternativbevegelsen og fra transpersonlig psykologi, definert som grenen av psykologien som forsker på spiritualitet, menneskers høyeste potensialer, intuisjon, enhetsopplevelser og nær døden-opplevelser. Her er det snakk om motstridende vitenskapsteoretiske perspektiver og paradigmer. Engedal (2014: 50–51), også han religionspsykolog, skriver at all systematisk innsamling av menneskelig erfaring regnes som empirisk vitenskap i humanistisk psykologi; som i samfunnsvitenskap brukes kvalitative intervjuer, etnografi og tekstanalyser som metoder. Humanistisk psykologi undersøker subjektive personlige opplevelser, inkludert mystiske og spirituelle erfaringer og fokuserer på fenomener som bidrar til realisering av menneskets høyeste potensial, ikke primært på sykdom og terapi (Engedal 2014). Mens humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi ikke er etablert i academia i Skandinavia, finnes fagfeltene på en rekke britiske og amerikanske universiteter, og spirituell oppvåkning er etablert som et forskningsfelt i både England og USA. De siste årene er det kommet flere akademiske bøker om spirituell oppvåkning utenfor religiøse kontekster, også med forskere og akademikere som forteller om sine

egne opplevelser (Evans og Read 2020; Taylor 2021; Mills 2022; Woollacott og Lorimer 2022).

Maslow (1970) regnes som grunnlegger for humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi. Han skrev at mange selvaktualiserende personer har ekstatiske og mystiske erfaringer, som han kalte høydepunktsopplevelser («peak experiences»). Disse utgjør en type oppvåkningserfaring, kjennetegnet ved en mystisk opplevd enhet med alt, en ego-transcenderende og frigjørende opplevelse. Høydepunktsopplevelser er som regel kortvarige, men for noen blir de en permanent tilstand. Mange har forbigående oppvåkningserfaringer før de våkner opp til permanent psykologisk transformasjon. Ifølge Maslow (1970) handler opplevelsene om å komme i kontakt med seg selv, og de er tilgjengelige for alle, uavhengig av livssyn.

Transpersonlig psykologi (Taylor 2017, 2018; Grof og Grof 1990) skiller mellom to hovedtyper av spontane oppvåkningsopplevelser: endrede bevissthetstilstander og kroppslig energi. Førstnevnte tilsvarer Maslows (1970) høydepunktsopplevelser og viser til bevissthetstilstander der egoet¹ oppløses og man føler enhet med alt. Sistnevnte kalles kundalini-oppvåkning, etter yogatradisjonens ord for livskraft (Sanella 1989; Greenwell 1990, 2018). Kundalini føles i kroppen, og kan oppleves som alt fra gåsehud og tårer i øynene når man blir følelsesmessig rørt, til elektrisk strøm gjennom kroppen og ufrivillige kroppsbevegelser. Oppvåkningsprosesser fører til psykologisk transformasjon over tid (Taylor 2017), men innebærer ofte vonde renselsesprosesser der gamle traumer kommer opp i bevisstheten, ofte kalt «sjelens mørke natt» etter den kristne mystikeren Johannes av Korset som levde i Spania i middelalderen. I transpersonlig psykologi brukes begrepet «sjelens mørke natt» om forbigående perioder med negative opplevelser, en renselsesprosess som skjer før, under og etter oppvåkninger når fortrenkte traumer kommer opp i bevisstheten (Grof og Grof 1990).

Oppvåkningsprosesser består av forbigående tilstander som gradvis eller plutselig fører til permanent transformasjon og høyere bevissthetsnivåer (1970). Det er psykologiske prosesser, uavhengig av filosofisk eller religiøs tro (Taylor 2017). Grof og Grof (1990) omtaler oppvåkning som personlige møter med det hellige, et medfødt menneskelig potensial for bedre emosjonell og psykosomatisk helse, frihet og dypere relasjoner med folk, naturen og eksistensen. De fleste opplever oppvåkning mykt og gradvis, det kan starte med å lese spirituelle bøker eller meningsfulle sammentreff med spesielle personer. For andre er endringen dramatisk og plutselig, en spirituell krise. Grof og Grof (1990) ser på oppvåkning som menneskets naturlige forsøk på å helbrede seg selv fra

1. Ifølge freudiansk psykologi er egoet eller «jeget» den bevisste delen av personligheten som forholder seg til en ytre virkelighet og medierer mellom instinktive impulser og moralske normer. Egoopløsning viser til en tilstand der skillet mellom det avgrensede og organiserte jeget og verden utenfor blir utydelig og smuldrer opp.

negative opplevelser og traumer, en naturlig psykoterapi. Når mye ubevisst materiale kommer opp, forstyrres personens funksjon i hverdagen.

Taylor (Taylor 2017) mener at enkelte er født «våkne», at noen våkner gradvis, mens de fleste våkner plutselig. Gradvis oppvåkning skjer ofte når man praktiserer yoga eller meditasjon, mens spontan oppvåkning ofte skjer utenfor spirituelle kontekster. Mange faktorer kan utløse plutselig oppvåkning: sterke emosjonelle opplevelser, sex, fødsel, psykedelika, rusavhengighet og nær-døden-oplevelser. Psykologiske påkjenninger er den vanligste utløsende faktoren, fulgt av naturopplevelser, meditasjon og kunst. Permanent oppvåkning er irreversibelt. Personen føler seg født på ny. Det bringer økt velvære, klarhet og mer intens bevissthet, sterkere medfølelse og opplevelse av å være forbundet med andre, og mindre behov for gruppeidentifikasjon, ifølge Taylor (2017).

METODE

Artikkelens empiri består av kvalitative intervjuer med tre personer som hadde opplevd en spirituell oppvåkning. Vi ba dem fortelle sine historier og spurte etter utvidet bevissthet (høydepunktopplevelser), kroppslige energiopplevelser (kundalini), og negative opplevelser («sjelens mørke natt»). Her tok vi utgangspunkt i tre av de mest utbredte oppvåkningserfaringene beskrevet av Grof og Grof (1990) og Taylor (2017, 2018), og brukte betegnelser som vi visste respondentene selv var kjent med. Vi stilte oppfølgingsspørsmål om chakraåpning og oppvåkningsprosessen over tid. Respondentene er to menn og en kvinne fra våre sosiale nettverk. De er mellom 35 og 50 år og bor på Østlandet. De kjenner ikke hverandre og er ikke i samme miljø. Alle gjør spirituelle praksiser, er vant til å snakke om spirituelle erfaringer og kjent med begreper som kundalini, chakraer og «sjelens mørke natt» som brukes både i alternative spirituelle miljøer og i transpersonlig psykologi. Det at respondenter, artikkelforfattere og forskningslitteratur hadde felles begreper gjorde intervju- og analyseprosessen enklere.

I en religionsvitenskapelig studie av yoga bruker Olsson (2018), som selv er yogalærer, sin posisjon som insider og forsker som et fortrinn. Siden hun praktiserer selv, kjenner hun feltet, og det opphever maktasymmetrien og motsetningen mellom forsker og intervjusubjekt. Likeledes bruker også vi, som begge deltar i alternative spirituelle miljøer og har egne oppvåkningsopplevelser, denne innsideforståelsen som en fordel når vi skal forstå respondentenes opplevelser. Intervjusituasjonen ble en likeverdig samtale siden vi har felles referanserammer. Utfordringen her ligger i risikoen for at vi tolker respondentenes fortellinger inn i egne forståelsesrammer, og kanskje går glipp av opplevelsenes subjektive egenart. De kan dermed tolkes som likere enn de er. På tross av mange felles opplevelser mellom forskere og intervjusubjekter, fikk vi frem variasjon i typer opplevelser gjennom respondentenes unike personlige historier og opplevelser, som også gjenfinnes i litteraturen. Som Olsson (2018), vil vi si at kunnskap konstrueres i mellommenneskelige relasjoner, og det vil alltid være subjektive elementer i tolkningen av intervjudata.

Når det gjelder forskningsetikk, var vi bevisst på at slike opplevelser kan være sensitive selv om respondentene allerede snakket åpent om dem i sine egne sosiale nettverk. Derfor har vi anonymisert deltakerne. Vi tok ikke opptak av intervjuene, men brukte håndskrevne notater som vi lagret direkte under pseudonymene. Vi var i kontakt med NSD/Sikt som godkjente denne praksisen og sa at det da ikke var nødvendig å melde prosjektet siden vi ikke lagret noen persondata.

INTERVJUER

JON: RUSBRUK OG POSTTRAUMATISK TRANSFORMASJON

Jon fortalte at han hadde en vanskelig ungdomstid med rusmisbruk, og han hadde sin første spirituelle opplevelse på psykedelisk fleinsopp. Senere fikk han kundaliniaktivering gjennom energioverføring, og opplevde åpning av hjertechakra. Han praktiserer yoga og forteller om skyggearbeid² med tidligere traumer. Da Jon var 18 år, hadde han en intens visjon på psilocybinsopp. Han forteller:

Jeg kunne bla gjennom hele livet mitt inni hjernen, som et bibliotek. Jeg ble vist alle situasjoner der jeg hadde såret andre direkte og indirekte. Det gjorde fysisk vondt, og føltes som ti tusen nåler. Etterpå utviklet jeg mer medfølelse. Jeg opplevde også at jeg var i et dypt hull, som jeg ikke kunne komme ut av, men jeg kunne se lyset over meg.

Forskningslitteraturen om oppvåkning (Grof og Grof 1990; Taylor 2017: 146–152) forteller at psykedelika ofte utløser forbigående oppvåkningsopplevelser, fordi stoffene oppløser egoet, og at gradvis oppvåkning utenfor spirituelle kontekster ofte begynner med psykedelika.

De neste ti årene beskriver Jon som preget av depresjon, angst og rusbruk. Mange rusbrukere er spesielt sensitive på grunn av opplevde traumer, og deres sug etter rusmidler kan ses som søken etter transcendens. Det er vanlig at folk slutter med rus etter plutselige oppvåkninger.

Jon opplevde det som Taylor (2017) kaller en «posttraumatisk transformasjon» etter kundalinioppvåkning. Sanella (1989) beskriver kundalinioppvåkning som indre terapi som er overlegen alle kjente terapier gitt utenfra. Jon beskriver kundaliniaktivering utløst av energioverføring fra et åndelig medium:

Jeg følte kribling i lårene, bekkenet og underkroppen der rotchakra er. En sterk fysisk energi spredde seg hele veien opp til hodet. Det var euforisk,

2. I jungiansk psykologi representerer «skyggen» deler av personligheten som vi har fortrenget ned i underbevisstheten fordi de er sosialt uakseptable eller forbundet med skam. Skyggearbeid er å bevisstgjøre dette slik at skyggene ikke lenger ubevisst styrer atferd eller projiseres på andre mennesker.

veldig emosjonelt og en lykkefølelse. Det føltes som førti kilo ble tatt av ryggen min. Min sosiale angst forsvant, og jeg sluttet å ruse meg samme dag. Jeg fikk følelsene mine tilbake, og etterpå får jeg ofte gåsehud og føler et rush i kroppen når noen sier noe som resonnerer med meg.

Jons opplevelse passer med klassisk yogisk beskrivelse av energi som strømmer oppover i kroppen fra rotchakra til topp (Greenwell 1990). I den indiske tradisjonen var det ofte en opplyst lærer (guru) som ga energioverføring, men i samtidsspiritualiteten blir det hevdet at hvem som helst med aktiv kundalini kan aktivere andre (Greenwell 2018: 54–55). Noen kjenner intens energi i kroppen når de er i nærheten av en elsker, venn eller fremmed med aktiv kundalini. Personene trenger ikke være bevisst at de overfører energi. Sanella (1989) skriver at kundalini lettere aktiveres hos individer med sensitivt nervesystem.

Jon forteller at psykedelikaopplevelsen åpnet hans øvre chakraer, og hjertet åpnet seg da han mottok det han beskrev som sjamanistisk healing fra en yogalærer som også praktiserer sjamanisme. Kombinasjonen av yoga og sjamanisme er utbredt i de alternative spirituelle miljøene som respondentene tilhører, men en dypere diskusjon av dette er utenfor artikkelens fokus. Det føltes som hjertet fysisk åpnet seg, og utvidet seg ut i armene, beskriver han. Han omtaler hjerteåpningen som transformerende, den ledet han til en spirituell livsvei som yogalærer og energihealer. Jon jobber med å åpne de nedre chakraene gjennom yogapraksis og skyggearbeid. Han reflekterer over traumer som kommer opp:

Oppvåkningsopplevelsene fører til en renselsesprosess der jeg blir mer bevisst på mine skyggesider som kommer opp. Mørke og traumatiske erfaringer kommer opp, mer lys kommer inn, og det presser mørket opp til overflaten. Jeg ser hvor jeg trenger å utvikle meg selv.

Jons beskrivelse ligner det Greenwell sier om at når kundalini aktiveres, renses sentralnervesystemet for gamle traumer, og emosjonelle mønstre lagret i kroppen kommer til overflaten for å forløses (2018: 30). Det er også interessant å merke seg at oppvåkning og kundaliniaktivering kobles til selvutvikling, som er et utbredt narrativ og ideal både i samtidsspiritualiteten og vestlig kultur generelt.

PETER: FØDT VÅKEN OG SPIRITUELLE OPLEVELSER I EN GURU-LEDET BEVEGELSE

Peter forteller om paranormale fenomener som barn, etterfulgt av en vanskelig ungdomstid. Som ung voksen var han aktiv i en guru-ledet bevegelse og hadde flere spontane oppvåkningsopplevelser av både den bevissthetsutvidende og den energetiske (kundalini) typen beskrevet av Taylor (2018). Som barn hadde Peter ofte endrete bevissthetstilstander, ut-av-kroppen opplevelser og paranormale opplevelser. Han sier at hans kronechakra har vært åpent så lenge han kan huske. Greenwell (2018: 102–104) skriver at et

åpent kronechakra indikerer ego-oppløsning og åpner for endrete bevissthetstilstander og ut-av-kroppen opplevelser.

Peter beskriver ungdomstiden som preget av desperasjon, manglende tilhørighet, meningsløshet, og å ikke passe inn. Da han var 20, fikk han spirituelle opplevelser mens han leste bøker som *Seth Speaks* og Louise Hays *You Can Heal Your Life*. Peters livshistorie minner om Taylor (2017), som ble født våken og følte seg fremmedgjort og deprimerert som barn, til han oppdaget spirituelle praksiser i 20-årene. Spirituelle bøker ga også Taylor oppvåkingsopplevelser, og han skriver at personer som er født våkne ofte føler seg frustrert over livet til de opplever transformative vendepunkter til mer autentiske liv. Peter forteller at han hadde mange episoder med glimt av noe større, spontane innsikter kom når han var i krise. Han opplevde hjerteåpning i små øyeblikk der han ble overveldet av sorg og smerte ved dødsfall. Han beskriver kriblende følelser av glede og åpenhet i brystet, og at hjertet blir stort.

Mens han var aktiv i Osho-bevegelsen opplevde han lykkefølelse når dype innsikter kom gjennom lesing, bønn, meditasjon og dans. Det er kjent fra transpersonlig psykologi at disse praksisene kan utløse oppvåkning (Taylor 2017). Hanky (2021) skriver at Osho-bevegelsen lærer at oppvåkning er noe alle kan oppnå, opplysning er ikke lenger forbeholdt munk og helgener. Den norske guruen Vasant Swaha hadde en slik transformerende opplevelse, der egoet ble borte og han følte fred og lykke. Han omtaler det som en ny fødsel, og måtte lære å fungere i verden på nytt. De største opplevelsene kom gjennom gruppeterapi, sier Peter:

Å ta del i andres utviklingsprosesser ga meg de sterkeste følelsene av å være ett med eksistensen. Det var overveldende, jeg følte en strøm av energi, å smelte inn i det guddommelige, og smelte sammen med andre.

Peters beskrivelser av enhet og sammensmelting minner om Maslows (1970) omtale av høydepunktsopplevelser. Peter beskriver hyppige energetiske opplevelser med følelser av eufori, letthet og enhet, utløst av musikk og spesielt indisk sitar, dans, meditasjon, sex og fysisk trening. Taylor (2017) skriver at slike energiopplevelser kan overlape med høydepunktsopplevelser, fordi egooppløsningen også har energetiske aspekter. Peter opplevde også klassisk yogisk energioverføring, der en indisk guru holdt tommelen på panna hans og han så indre visjoner.

Peter opplever fortsatt vonde følelser, med en underliggende lykke som gjør at mørket ikke lenger føles så dypt, og det er alltid en utvei fra mørket. Greenwell (2018) påpeker at etter kundalinioppvåkninger er det en permanent bakgrunnsfølelse av lykke og kjærlighet selv når man føler psykisk smerte. Vi lærer gradvis at vi ikke er tankene og følelsene våre, de er forbigående opplevelser som kan observeres. Peter har nå permanent tillit til livet og er ikke redd for å dø. Han mener at han er født våken og hadde et vendepunkt i 20-årsalderen i personlig krise. Han sier at spirituelle opplevelser har gitt livet retning og mening, innsikter som har gitt høyere bevissthet og samtidig bidrar til

videre søken. Det samsvarer med Grof og Grof (1990) og Greenwell (2018) som skriver at oppvåkning er begynnelsen til varige selvutviklings- og transformasjonsprosesser.

ANNA: INTENS KUNDALINI, ADVAITA OG SPIRITUELL KRISE

Anna beskrev det hun selv definerte som en kraftig kundaliniopplevelse først, fulgt av opplevelser av enhetsbevissthet, som stabiliserte seg etter at hun mottok energioverføring fra en spirituell lærer. Anna forteller om intens kundaliniaktivering som fremkalte det Grof og Grof (1990) kaller spirituell krise som forstyrrer psykologiske funksjoner i hverdagen. Taylor skriver at slike episoder ofte tar noen år før de roer seg og integreres (2017: 157–164). Annas opplevelse fant sted åtte år før vi intervjuet henne, mens hun arbeidet med energihealing. Hun forteller:

Halve ansiktet mitt ble numment, en stemme kom og ba meg legge meg ned på gulvet. Jeg ble dradd ned på gulvet, det var veldig fysisk, and kroppen min beveget seg i ulike posisjoner og mudraer jeg aldri hadde visst om. Jeg var utslitt, men ikke redd. Jeg skjønnte at dette var bra for meg.

Ifølge transpersonlig psykologi (Grof og Grof 1989, 1990; Greenwell 1990, 2018) kan ufrivillige kroppsbevegelser og yogaposisjoner skje under kraftige kundalinioppvåkninger. Annas kroppslige opplevelse var den første av tre omganger, etterfulgt av emosjonell forløsning med hjerteåpning. Annas hjerte åpnet seg under kundaliniaktiveringen. Hun sier:

Jeg gråt og gråt og gråt. Jeg følte det som om hjertet mitt åpnet seg fullstendig. Jeg følte meg trygg, og jeg hadde en sterk følelse av kjærlighet.

Greenwell (2018) beskriver åpning av hjertechakra som intense fysiske og emosjonelle opplevelser der beskyttelsesmurene vi har bygget rundt hjertet, løses opp. Det fører til dramatiske forandringer i energi og verdensbilde, blokkeringer forsvinner, og folk føler spontant ubetinget kjærlighet. Anna forteller at etter hendelsen følte hun behov for å være mer autentisk, prioritere seg selv og slutte å leve etter andres forventninger.

Tre år før intervjuet opplevde Anna dramatiske bevissthetsendringer etter energioverføring fra en spirituell lærer i advaita-tradisjonen.³ Hun beskriver at hun oppfattet verden på helt nye måter. Hun hadde åtte energioverføringer fra denne læreren og hver gang føltes det som om hun nådde et nytt bevissthetsnivå. Hun omtaler dette som «non-dual» oppvåkning og annerledes enn kundaliniaktivering. Greenwell (2018) skriver at

3. Advaita vedanta er en retning innenfor hinduisk filosofi som fremmer et monistisk syn på virkeligheten. Ifølge denne tradisjonen er alt forbundet, selv om verden tilsynelatende består av separate ting. Advaita har blitt popularisert i Vesten blant annet gjennom moderne guruer som Maharishi Mahesh Yogi og Osho.

energioverføringer er naturlige fenomen som ligner på hvordan latter og hoste smitter. Energioverføring finner sted når oppvåknete personers energi og bevissthet resonnerer med andre nær dem. Mens de fleste spirituelle tradisjoner fremmer gradvis spirituell utvikling over mange år, fremmer en del vestlige advaita vedanta lærere plutselig oppvåkning (Greenwell 2018: 179). Siden vi allerede er ett med det guddommelige, trenger vi bare å miste illusjonen om atskillelse, skriver Greenwell (2018) og Taylor (2018: 142–143) om advaita-perspektivet. Mange av dagens advaita-lærere sier at oppvåkning «bare skjer». Det er ingenting å forberede seg på, praksis behøves ikke, og anstrengelse virker mot sin hensikt. Alt som trengs er realisering (Taylor 2017). Greenwell (2018: 179) og Taylor (2017: 143) sier begge at ikke-dualistisk oppvåkning forutsetter direkte erfaring av at alt er ett, slik Anna hadde. Det har ingenting med mental tro å gjøre, det handler om å gå ut av hodet og slippe alle projeksjoner slik at enhetsbevisstheten våkner fra illusjonen om atskillelse (Greenwell 2018: 184–185).

To uker etter energioverføringen opplevde Anna en spirituell krise, «sjelens mørke natt» som beskrevet av Grof og Grof (1990: 46–63). Hun beskriver at hun mistet hukommelsen, og hennes intellektuelle hjerne «forsvant». Dette samsvarer med perspektiver vi finner i transpersonlig psykologi. Taylor (2017) skriver at hukommelsesproblemer ofte oppstår i forbindelse med spirituell oppvåkning. Grof og Grof (1990) skriver at rasjonaliteten midlertidig oppløses, lineær og logisk tenkning forbigås av intuisjon og fantasi. Anna sier:

De neste seks månedene var tøffe. En følelse av fred var der, jeg følte enhet, men innimellom det kom det opp sterke traumatiske følelser. Jeg isolerte meg, det var vanskelig å være mor, jeg var konstant stresset og i fight/flight modus. Innimellom følte jeg en dyp ro, før neste bølge kom. Flere ganger lå jeg på gulvet, følte at jeg kom til å dø, og sa, jeg gir opp, det er greit om jeg dør. Så snart jeg ga opp, skiftet energien og jeg følte fred for en stund.

Anna føler seg nå mer stabil med konstant fredfullhet i bakgrunnen, men fortsatt kommer gamle traumer opp. Greenwell (2018) skriver at det er typisk for sjelens mørke natt, Taylor (2017) skriver at kraftige og plutselige oppvåkninger gjør det vanskelig å fungere i hverdagen, slik Anna beskriver, og integreringsprosessen kan ta flere år. Greenwell (2018: 107) påpeker at mange spirituelle lærere har lite kunnskap om oppvåkning, og ofte gir for mye energioverføring på en gang for sensitive mottakere.

ANALYSE

KUNDALINI: NÅR SPIRITUALITET BLIR KROPPSLIG

Taylor (2018) skiller mellom to hovedtyper spirituelle opplevelser: endrede bevissthets-tilstander og kroppslig energi. Individer har ofte flere forbigående høydepunktsopplevelser og energetiske opplevelser før de går over til en permanent oppvåknet tilstand. Dette

fant vi igjen i intervjuene. I respondentenes livshistorier ser vi at Jon beskriver utvidet bevissthet på psykedelika, mens både han og Anna beskriver henholdsvis myk og intens kundalinioppvåkning. Jons spirituelle opplevelse på psykedelika er et typisk eksempel på det Maslow (1970) kaller høydepunktsopplevelser, de lykkeligste og mest ekstatiske øyeblikkene i livet. Maslow definerte disse tilstandene som episoder av enhetsbevissthet, der personlige grenser oppløses og det føles som om man blir ett med andre, naturen og eksistensen, med følelser av ekstatiske glede, der man transcenderer tid og rom, og blir ett med Gud. Maslow antar at alle mennesker kan oppleve glimt av høyere bevissthet, som kan bli stabile plataopplevelser. Høydepunktsopplevelser samsvarer med det Taylor (2018) kaller egooppløsning, og er den vanligste typen spirituell oppvåkning.

Energetiske oppvåkninger (kundalini) er mindre vanlig, men skjer stadig oftere i vestlige land, spontant eller utløst av spirituell praksis, eller gjennom energioverføring fra personer med aktiv kundalini (Taylor 2018). I transpersonlig psykologi (Grof og Grof 1990) brukes de indiske begrepene kundalini for livskraft, shaktipat for energioverføring, og chakra for kroppens energisentre, selv om livskraftenergi skal være universelt på tvers av kultur og livssyn (Greenwell 1990). Kundalini tilsvarer seksuell energi eller libido, og forstås i yoga som feminin kraft, symbolisert ved gudinnen Shakti, mens Shiva representerer bevisstheten som er maskulin. Dette korresponderer med stereotypiske ideer om menn som rasjonelle og kvinner som emosjonelle og kroppslige. Selv om kundalini ikke er et medisinsk begrep, viser det til biologiske prosesser i nervesystemet, ifølge den amerikanske legen Lee Sanella (1989), som var en pioner i den medisinske beskrivelsen av «kundalini-syndromet». Han definerer kundalini fysiologisk som energi som får sentralnervesystemet til å fjerne stress og rense blokkeringer. Greenwell (1990) beskriver kundalinioppvåkning som hendelser der personer begynner å føle denne energien, som utløser livstransformerende fysiske og emosjonelle prosesser over flere år. Individuelle kundaliniopplevelser varierer i intensitet, varighet og utløsende faktorer, men har felles opplevelsen av kroppslig energi, som kan begynne med gåsehud og gledestårer, og varierer fra forsiktig kribling til elektriske sjokk og kraftige bølger av tilsynelatende motiverte følelser, angst, tristhet, og ekstatiske glede (Grof og Grof 1989: 15).

Ifølge Bonnie Greenwell (2018), en amerikansk transpersonlig terapeut som skrev doktorgrad om kundalini i 1988 og som senere har skrevet flere bøker basert på sin erfaring med å veilede klienter i oppvåkningsprosesser, er det vanlig å føle energistrømmer, hjerteklapp, søvnløshet, ufrivillige kroppsbevegelser, forsterket syn eller smak, øresus, paranormale fenomener som telepati og synkroniteter, intense uforutsigbare humørsvingninger med bølger av eufori, ekstatiske lykke og ubetinget kjærlighet, som skifter med angst and nedstemthet flere ganger om dagen eller varer i ukesvis. Energetiske oppvåkninger kan vare i måneder eller år, men roer seg til slutt. Greenwell (2018: 24) skriver at det hos hennes over 3 000 klienter var stor variasjon i hvordan kundalini beveger seg i kroppen, og langt fra alle opplevde at kundalini beveget seg oppover langs ryggraden fra rotchakra til kronechakra slik det ofte beskrives i yoga, og spesielt i kundaliniyoga.

Sanella (1989: 101) skriver at energien beveger seg fra føttene, langs ryggen til hodet, og foran tilbake til magen. Dixon (2008) skriver at det ikke er lineært, kundalini arbeider samtidig i alle chakraer, det starter i hjernen og bevegelsen gjennom kroppen varierer individuelt. Blant våre respondenter hadde Jon en klassisk yogisk kundaliniaktivering som strømmet oppover, Peter hadde gradvis og rolig aktivering av energien, mens Anna hadde kraftig kundaliniaktivering med sterke fysiske og emosjonelle aspekter.

Greenwell (2018) skriver videre at kundalini kan åpne chakraene i ulik rekkefølge, og at det er vanlig i moderne samfunn der mange «lever i hodet» at de øvre chakraene åpnes først, så hjertet, og til slutt de nedre chakraene når personen integrerer det spirituelle i kroppen, i kontrast til rekkefølgen som ofte beskrives i for eksempel kundaliniyoga, som begynner nederst. Barndomstraumer fører til at vi dissosierer fra kroppen, slik at de nedre chakraene lukkes og vi «lever i hodet». To av våre respondenter beskriver at de øvre chakraene ble åpnet først, og alle tre beskriver hjerteåpning som en betydningsfull hendelse der de følte fysisk energi rundt hjerte, følelser av kjærlighet, og at frykt forsvant. De kroppslige energetiske prosessene fører til permanent psykologisk transformasjon, ifølge Grof og Grof (1990). Kundalini åpner kroppens energisentre og spesielt hjertet. Alle våre respondenter beskriver hvordan hjertechakraet ble åpnet, og de ble overstrømmet med sterke følelser av ubetinget kjærlighet. Jon beskrev at hjertet åpnet seg «ut i armene», Peter beskrev kribling i brystet og at hjertet «ble stort» mens Anna beskrev det som at hun ble fylt av kjærlighet.

YOGA, OPPVÅKNING OG TRANSFORMASJON

En religionsvitenskapelig studie som kan relateres til den transpersonlige forskningen på kundalinioppvåkning, er Olssons (2018) studie av kroppsliggjøring og feminitet blant svenske yogalærere. Hun tolker dagens yoga inn i den subjektive vendingen i postmoderne spiritualitet (Heelas og Woodhead 2005), bort fra religiøs tro og over på kroppsliggjort spirituell erfaring, undersøker hvordan yogautøvere kroppsliggjør en subjektiv spiritualitet. Her skiller hun mellom to ulike yogatradisjoner, den patriarkalske religiøse og asketiske tradisjonen som ser kroppen som hinder for frigjøring, i motsetning til den mer feminine og spirituelle tantra-tradisjonen som ser kroppen som redskap for frigjøring.

Olsson fremhever den materielle vendingen innenfor religionsvitenskapen som et nyttig korreks til en patriarkalsk og eurosentrisk tradisjon som har underordnet kroppen til fordel for troslære. Hun mener at religionsvitenskap har vært preget av en patriarkalsk dikotomi der menn fokuserer på intellektuell tro, mens kropp og følelser tilskrives kvinner, og at forskning på «feminine» dimensjoner som kropp, følelser, kjærlighet, og spirituelle erfaringer er underrepresentert (2018: 37). En av Olssons respondenter snakker om hvordan kvinnefellesskapet gjennom yoga gir en fin følelse i kroppen. Med en tantrisk tilnærming sier hun at yoga gjennom nytelse og lykkefølelse endrer bevisstheten og muliggjør raskere oppvåkning. Hun understreker at alt er ett, bevissthet finnes i

alt. Mørket og skyggesidene må inkluderes gjennom psykologiske gruppeprosesser for frigjøring og helbredelse. Hun anser praksisen som spirituell, men ikke religiøs, selv om tekstene er religiøse. Hun tar avstand fra religiøs autoritet (Olsson 2018: 46–51).

Olsson skriver videre at nyåndelig praksis tar avstand fra patriarkalsk, autoritær, utenomkroppslig religiøsitet. I likhet med feministisk teori avviser den binære opposisjoner, overskrider skillet mellom religiøs og sekulær, og kroppsliggjør relasjonen til verden i stedet for å transcendere. I forbindelse med våre empiriske data er det interessant hvordan de to hovedtypene for oppvåkning – endret bevissthet og kroppslig energi – kan karakteriseres som henholdsvis maskulin og feminin med utgangspunkt i et hinduistisk begrepsapparat. I tantra er bevissthet Shiva mens kundalini er shakti.⁴ Transcendens er maskulint, kroppsliggjøring er feminint. Målet er at både menn og kvinner forener begge. Kvinner har ofte en mer relasjonell forståelse av det guddommelige, men også mange menn foretrekker spiritualitet fremfor religion. Vår studie bekrefter Olssons observasjon at både menn og kvinner nå snur seg mot det feminine, kroppslige og følelsesmessige, etter at våre kulturelle forestillinger i lang tid har vært patriarkalsk dominerte.

Med særlig relevans for det Anna fortalte oss om sin oppvåkingsprosess, diskuterer Hanky (2021) sammenhengen mellom yoga og spirituell oppvåkning. Den norske guruen Vasant Swaha i advaita (nonduality)-bevegelsen, tolker moksha psykologisk, der spirituelle lærere veileder folk på reise mot å våkne opp til det sanne Selvet, og frigjøre seg fra falsk kulturell betinging som egoet har internalisert fra samfunnet og fra tradisjonell religion. Målet for meditasjon er oppvåkning, å transcendere seg selv og våkne opp til en permanent tilstand av lykksalighet, eller «bliss» (Hanky 2021: 7). De fremhever også at å være i nærheten av en som har våknet opp, er mer effektivt enn meditasjon for selv å våkne opp. Det er dette som kalles shaktipat eller energioverføring, som alle våre tre respondenter forteller at det har opplevd.

HVORDAN SKILLE SPIRITUELL OPPVÅKNING FRA RELIGIØS OMVENDELSE?

Selv om oppvåkning medfører et skifte i verdensbilde, antyder fortellingene fra våre respondenter at det primært er en psykologisk transformasjon mer enn en konvertering til nye trosforestillinger. Jon forteller hvordan en byrde ble løftet av skuldrene hans, angsten forsvant, han fikk kontakt med følelsene sine og sluttet å ruse seg. Jon og Peter beskriver en lykkefølelse, mens Anna fortalte at hun så verden på en helt ny måte men også følte negative følelser. I transpersonlig psykologi (Greenwell 2018; Grof og Grof 1990) beskrives oppvåkning som et skifte fra å «tro» på noe fortalt av andre, til en «viten» basert på personlige, kroppslige erfaringer. Etter en energetisk oppvåkning, fører hjerteåpningen og renselsesprosessen til en psykologisk transformasjon. Det er dermed interessant å sammenligne spirituell oppvåkning med religiøs omvendelse.

4. Shakti er navnet på en feminin guddommelig kraft i hinduismen.

Nygaard, Austad og Kleven (2017) sin empiriske studie av omvendelseserfaringer viser fellestrekk med oppvåkning. Religionspsykologisk forskning skiller mellom ulike typer omvendelseserfaring, plutselig omvendelser med sterk emosjonell aktivering og dramatisk endring, versus mer gradvis og kognitiv utvikling til å bli mer religiøs (Engedal 2014; La Cour 2014). Alle tre respondentene våre legger stor vekt på følelsesmessige endringer og følelser i kroppen, og både Jon og Peter beskriver lykkefølelse. Det kan tyde på at spirituell oppvåkning har likheter med plutselige religiøse omvendelser. Allerede William James (1907) var spesielt interessert i plutselig selvovergivelse som «bare skjer» som han omtalte som et normalt menneskelig fenomen. Han snakket blant annet om «bliss» – den nyomvendtes lykkefølelse. Det er mulig at plutselige omvendelseserfaringer var spirituelle oppvåkninger tolket i en religiøs ramme, mens gradvis kognitiv omvendelse i større grad var et mentalt skifte i trosforestillinger. Tilslutning til et nytt trossystem står sentralt i definisjonen av omvendelse, mens psykologisk transformasjon er viktigst i spirituell oppvåkning. Det er interessant at mens plutselig omvendelse blir sjeldnere i dagens samfunn (La Cour 2014), blir spirituell oppvåkning mer vanlig (Corneille og Luke 2021; Taylor 2017: 2), samtidig som flere kaller seg spirituelle, men ikke religiøse (Johansson 2018: 16–18).

Religionspsykologisk forskning viser at sjansen for radikal omvendelse er betydelig større hos personer som har tilknytningstraumer fra barndommen (Engedal 2014: 54). Det er rimelig å anta at korrelasjonen gjelder spirituell oppvåkning også. Religionspsykologi forklarer dette med at religion (tilknytning til Gud) «kompenserer» for manglende emosjonell tilknytning i barndommen (Engedal 2014: 54). Humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi (Greenwell 2018; Taylor 2018) forklarer dette derimot som at oppvåkningen bringer barndomstraumer opp i lyset for å helbrede dem gjennom opplevelsen av guddommelig kjærlighet. Den ledende religionspsykologen David Wulff (sitert i La Cour 2014) sier at hvis vi vil forstå ekstraordinære opplevelser som kjennetegner plutselig omvendelse, bør vi ikke lete i omvendelsesforskning, men i psykologisk forskning på spontane mystiske opplevelser. Plutselig omvendelse er følelsesmessig, ikke kognitiv, og knyttet til fenomener som transformasjon, helbredelse og kjærlighet. Våre respondenter forteller om sterk emosjonell aktivering, dramatiske psykologiske endringer, og en plutselig selvovergivelse som bare skjer, ledsaget av lykkefølelse, opplevelse av kjærlighet og helbredelse av traumer. I en norsk studie fant Trysnes (Trysnes 2017) at kristne ungdommer beskriver sine åndelige opplevelser svært likt som personer i alternative miljøer, og så her er det snakk om en «terapeutisk spiritualitet» (Trysnes 2017: 128–131).

SJELENS MØRKE NATT: NATURLIG TRAUMETERAPI

Respondentene forteller at kundalinioppvåkning åpner energisentre og sletter en del av den sosiokulturelle betingingen, som for eksempel frykt, hemninger og selvopplevde begrensninger som er tillært gjennom traumer i barndommen. De beskriver at hjerte-

åpning produserer intens kjærlighetsenergi og følelser av ubetinget kjærlighet som gjør spiritualitet til noe kroppslig og ikke lenger en mental tro. Jung (1975) sier at individueringsprosessen begynner med hjerteåpning, og vi kan da observere våre egne følelser uten å identifisere oss med dem. Ønsker, begjær, tilknytning og følelser i hjertet skaper en følelsesmessig berg- og dalbane av ekstatiske lykke og smerte om hverandre som kjenner seg ut som «sjelens mørke natt» etter kundalinioppvåkning (Greenwell 1990), noe som særlig kommer til uttrykk i Annas fortelling.

Respondentenes fortellinger resonnerer dermed med perspektiver vi finner i humanistisk og transpersonlig psykologi (Greenwell 2018; Taylor 2018). Våre tre respondenter beskriver hvordan traumer kommer opp under hva de kaller «sjelens mørke natt» som Grof og Grof har definert som en renselsesprosess der en spirituelt oppvåkning bringer til overflaten uforløste psykologiske traumer, skyggemateriale og psykisk mørke, som inkluderer barndomstraumer, minner om misbruk, tilknytningstraumer som manglende tilknytning, avvisning og atskillelse, samt traumer fra fødselen og enda tidligere (Grof og Grof 1990: 46–49). De skriver at det er vanlig å forløse blokkeringer i energisentrene i flere år etter en kundalinioppvåkning. Noen mønstre transformeres med en gang, men oppvåkning utsletter ikke alle psykiske blokkeringer, og etter den første euforiske fasen etter en oppvåkningsopplevelse, kommer ofte dypere psykologiske tema til overflaten. Ofte er dette traumer fra barndommen, og særlig relasjonstraumer og usikre tilknytningsmønstre som stammer fra relasjoner til foreldre i tidlig barndom (Grof og Grof 1990: 78–79). Assagioli har et syklisk perspektiv der det svinger mellom lys og mørke, glede og lidelse, på veien mot selvrealisering (Assagioli 1989: 37–40).

Greenwell (2018) skriver at vonde følelser som frykt, skam, angst og sorg, kommer opp i sjelens mørke natt, fordi kundalini fjerner det som er usunt. Ofte kommer følelsene uten tilhørende historie, så personen er ikke bevisst på årsaken til følelsen. Vi kan oppleve søvnløshet, depresjon, ekstrem energi, trøtthet, hjernetåke, overveldende kjærlighet, og økt følsomhet for «giftige» mennesker, miljøer og hendelser. Taylor (2017) skriver at også de som er født oppvåknet, slik som Peter blant våre respondenter, kan ha vonde opplevelser, siden også de har negative atferdsmønstre. Det er interessant hvordan nyere forskning (bl. a. Maté 2022) om hvordan traumer «setter seg i kroppen» peker i samme retning som det som i indisk filosofi kalles «samskara»⁵—følelsesmessige mønstre og spor. Disse perspektivene som legger vekt på at traumer sitter i kroppen mer enn i det mentale, fremmer også traumeterapi gjennom kroppslig bevegelse, med øvelser som risting, fremfor samtaleterapi. Det kan tenkes at kundalinioppvåkning setter i gang en lignende prosess innenfra, særlig i tilfeller med ufrivillige kroppsbevegelser slik Anna beskriver.

5. Den mest utbredte forståelsen av samskara i indisk filosofi er «sjelevandring» men det er også en mer spesifikk forståelse av begrepet som karmiske spor fra tidligere liv (Taylor 2017: 177).

KONKLUSJON

Respondentenes fortellinger fokuserer i stor grad på følelsesmessige aspekter, både en generell lykkefølelse og hvordan vonde følelser kommer opp, og kroppslige aspekter som at de fysisk føler at hjertet utvider seg. Dette ser ut til å være i tråd med beskrivelser i den transpersonlige psykologilitteraturen (Greenwell 1990; Grof og Grof 1990; Taylor 2017) om oppvåkning som en prosess fra hodet til hjerte til kropp, der kundalini-aktivering og hjerteåpning fører til en kroppsliggjøring av spiritualitet. Dette samsvarer med religionsvitenskapelig forskning på opplevelsene til både samtidsspirituelle (Olsson 2018) og kristne ungdommer (Trysnes 2017), som legger vekt på følelser og fysiske fenomener i kroppen fremfor mentale trosforestillinger. Den psykologiske transformasjonen har fellestrekk med plutselige omvendelser i kristne kontekster (Nygaard med flere 2017), der det snakkes om å «bli født på ny» selv om den psykologiske transformasjonen står mer sentralt enn en endring i trosforestillinger.

Oppvåkningen kan oppleves som en «posttraumatisk transformasjon» (Taylor 2018), en renselsesprosess, slik Jon fortalte om, en naturlig traumeterapi gjennom selvkjærlighet og opplevelsen av guddommelig kjærlighet som blir mulig å oppleve etter en hjerteåpning. Den kan også oppleves som en «spirituell krise», slik Anna fortalte om. Grof og Grof skriver at når psyken oversvømmes av frykt, ensomhet, følelsen av å være sinnsyk, og frykt for døden, fungerer ikke individet optimalt i den ytre verden (Grof og Grof 1990: 31–39). Opplevelsene tilknyttet det som kalles «sjelens mørke natt» kan ligne på symptomer på depresjon eller psykose. Uten støttende nettverk kan oppvåkningen bli en spirituell krise (Taylor 2017: 157–164). Transpersonlige psykologer (Grof og Grof 1989; Sanella 1989; Corneille og Luke 2021) understreker at spirituell oppvåkning bør forstås som en terapeutisk prosess av naturlig helbredelse i stedet for som psykopatologi. Endringen i virkelighetsoppfatning skjer som følge av at personene som opplever oppvåkning går utenfor mentale begrensninger og opplever verden i større grad gjennom følelser og gjennom kroppen. Her er det snakk om psykologiske fenomener som ligger bortenfor rene mentale og diskursive trosforestillinger, det som i et religiøst språk gjerne kalles sjelen, som er hva det greske ordet «psyke» betyr.

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