

The Intuition Network, A Thinking Allowed Television Underwriter, presents the following transcript from the series Thinking Allowed, Conversations On the Leading Edge of Knowledge and Discovery, with Dr. Jeffrey Mishlove.

WHAT IS KUNDALINI? with LEE SANNELLA, M.D.

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. Kundalini is a concept that's been developed in the theory and philosophy of yoga. It represents a coiled energy located at the base of the spine, considered like a coiled serpent or the serpent power, and through yogic practice or other circumstances this coiled energy rises through the body, activating various psychic and nervous energy centers. In yoga this is thought of as an auspicious sign of spiritual attainment. However, from the point of view of Western psychology and psychiatry, these same symptoms might be viewed as psychotic. With me today in the studio is Dr. Lee Sannella, a physician and author of *The Kundalini Experience: Psychosis or Transcendence?* Dr. Sannella is the founder of the Kundalini Clinic, and is an expert in dealing with individuals, both Eastern and Western, who are experiencing these symptoms of kundalini rising. Welcome, Lee.

LEE SANNELLA, Ph.D.: Hello, Jeffrey.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to have you here. You know, it's intriguing. In Western medicine we have the symbol of the caduceus, with the snakes twisted up the staff of Hermes. It's very, very similar to the symbol of the coiled serpent rising in the kundalini theory of yoga. Do you think there's a connection?

SANNELLA: Well, I think they both represent the same thing. One is a popularization of the other.

MISHLOVE: Which?

SANNELLA: Well, the caduceus is the derived symbol.

MISHLOVE: It's the original symbol of Hippocrates, I think, the founder of medicine.

SANNELLA: I don't know whether it was one or two serpents at that time, but it's close.

MISHLOVE: So there's a sense in which this understanding of the coiled energy rising through the body is very ancient. It was known to the ancient Western Greek physicians, as well as to the yogic practitioners.

SANNELLA: Well, I don't know. The coil to me means potential. It's a potential energy until it is activated. And the crossing of the snakes has more probably to do with the nadis, or the other accessory energy centers, aside from that which is supposed to be in the spinal canal. But our modern concept doesn't completely accord with that model.

MISHLOVE: Let's step back just a second, because you've introduced the term the nadis, and I think you're referring to centers of energy, like ganglia of nerves, that might be located in the arms, in the legs, around the sides -- sort of like the acupuncture meridians, or acupuncture points.

SANNELLA: That's good enough.

MISHLOVE: And also in yoga there's the concept of the chakras being central organs of psychic energy located right along the spinal column, basically; the third eye is one we often hear about. These are concepts that have been articulated very cogently and in quite a lot of detail in yogic philosophy, and I gather that these are concepts that you take seriously as a medical doctor.

SANNELLA: Not really. I take seriously the new event in the brain -- a new, as you said, psychophysiological event in the brain, which is what the kundalini is to me. The peripheral signs and symptoms, and the descriptions which refer to the spinal cord and the accessory systems, whatever they are -- acupuncture or nadis -- are all derivative from the central event in the brain, which is a change itself, which represents psychophysiological change in the whole organism. This change then gives the person who has spiritual inclinations the equipment with which to more adequately join with the divine, which as you said is the original meaning of yoga.

MISHLOVE: Now, the experience that is called kundalini, this change in the brain -- if one were in a culture such as the Hindu culture or other comparable cultures, if the person had this experience and communicated it to other people, it would be identified in this spiritual context -- "Oh yes, it's kundalini." And the person would be treated within that social framework. In our culture, when a person typically has the same experience -- and I gather you've worked with people who have had it spontaneously, or people who have been meditating and all of a sudden had it -- what happens?

SANNELLA: Well, it's largely something which you have learned not to talk too much about, because people have no understanding of it in general, of course, and therefore you're looked at as being quite odd, if not a little bit worse than odd -- more seriously afflicted than just being odd.

MISHLOVE: So in other words, in one culture this would be considered a very auspicious experience. People would be happy. A person would be getting a lot of positive attention and support to go through the experience and let it unfold. In our own culture, the response might be quite the opposite.

SANNELLA: Yes. And there are lots of other openings, in the sense that this is not the only one. Probably we should call it the master opening in the psychophysiology of the human being, but there are lots of preliminary and other states, psychic states, that correspond to the yoga siddhis or powers -- like out-of-the-body states, for instance, or bilocation states, or whatever the states are, and all of them are in a sense real. They are clearly defined in yoga, and people experience them, and if anyone wants to take the time and effort to search them out, they still exist all over the world.

MISHLOVE: And people might experience these states without being engaged in any spiritual practice at all.

SANNELLA: Certainly.

MISHLOVE: And it must be all the more confusing for these people.

SANNELLA: Yes, because I've had people write me the oddest things: "Take this 'kantloni' away from me. I don't want it anymore. It's bothering me. I can't do my work. It keeps me awake at night." It's very annoying in some cases and to some people.

MISHLOVE: Let's talk about psychosis for a minute, Lee. These experiences seem to be breaks with reality. People are hearing voices, seeing visions, having physical ailments for which there is no organic cause. These are all typical symptoms of psychosis. Do you view all psychosis as a spiritual opening?

SANNELLA: No. Psychosis may accompany spiritual opening of this kind, either in part or almost continuously, and the two can be distinguished and should be, because the psychosis is something to be understood, but not supported in the same way that you would support a spiritual opening, which is a normal sort of process that man is heir to.

MISHLOVE: Can you define psychosis, then, and try and distinguish between it and a spiritual opening?

SANNELLA: Well, psychosis in general is having no insight into all of these things that are going on. It is aberration without understanding of that aberration as being aberrated. That's a crude definition, but you get a very clear idea of what is psychotic and what is not, simply by talking with someone in the ordinary way. I mean, they might start off on a total tangent, or show absolutely no emotional responsiveness to some things and a super-responsiveness to others, inappropriate affect, and so forth.

MISHLOVE: A classic example of what we think of as psychosis are people who believe themselves to be Jesus Christ.

SANNELLA: Yes.

MISHLOVE: Now, sometimes this might represent a genuine spiritual opening, sometimes it might not.

SANNELLA: Yes.

MISHLOVE: And to discern whether or not that spiritual opening is legitimate must be a very subtle and delicate thing to do.

SANNELLA: Well, it is, and it could change from moment to moment in the person, if they were relatively unstable.

MISHLOVE: In developing the procedures in the Kundalini Clinic, you have spent a lot of time with people who are having genuine spiritual openings that would appear to be psychotic, and who need support within our Western context to get through that.

SANNELLA: Well, yes, that's the primary mode of treatment, is support for that part of it which is, as I say, explainable and understandable in historical and cross-cultural terms, because this appears in all cultures. And that part which is universal to man also, which is his aberrated state.

MISHLOVE: I would suppose that the basic kind of support that could be offered is just to be with that person and to let them communicate with you what they're experiencing as they experience it, without judging them.

SANNELLA: Well, I would say that's the primary mode of therapy, yes.

MISHLOVE: Does it involve, for example, meditating together with them?

SANNELLA: It does sometimes. It could, certainly, if that is something that comes natural to the therapist. If it's not, that's a different matter. Some of us are talented in that way, and some of us are talented in other ways. Some of us like to massage, manipulate, and so forth.

MISHLOVE: I would think a big problem that a person would have, experiencing a kundalini experience or a spiritual opening, would be how it would affect their relationships with their family, with their spouse or loved ones, with their children. How are they going to communicate what's happening to them to other people who may have no context within which this would make sense at all?

SANNELLA: It's very difficult. That's one of the main difficulties, and that's why lots of people get more unstable than they need to be, because they don't have this outlet, and they don't have the understanding that surrounds them. It's quite difficult, and also they're apt to become quite grandiose about it, as a compensation for the put-down or letdown that they feel.

MISHLOVE: What's your prognosis for cases like this? Do they get better after a while? How long does it typically take?

SANNELLA: Oh yes, they all get better, in the sense that it cools off. It may take anywhere from -- some people are furious because they've only had the experience once, and then it leaves, and they look for the rest of their life for it. I have a few people like this. Other people get very tired of it after ten or twelve years.

MISHLOVE: You mean it can be a persistent, kind of annoying symptom for that long?

SANNELLA: It can be somewhat annoying. It depends on what they are doing with it, and whether they have a practice in which it can be incorporated naturally and gracefully, and so forth. If they're fighting it, of course, usually they're successful, not always, in fighting it. It has a way of its own.

MISHLOVE: When you say fighting it, are you saying --

SANNELLA: Resisting.

MISHLOVE: Is that healthy for a person to do, to resist?

SANNELLA: No, I don't think so. Because it's part of their natural equipment, which has been called into action, and therefore they should honor it like any other function of the body.

MISHLOVE: Do you find that after a period of time, if a person has this opening, and then they learn how to adjust, to resolve things, to establish a higher equilibrium, that then their life begins to function, you might say, at a higher level?

SANNELLA: Well, I think often that will happen. They may be in and out of that state. It's unusual to have someone who is totally in that divine connection constantly. Those are the avatars who we see in Jesus and Buddha and so forth.

MISHLOVE: Well, Lee, you're a medical doctor. You practice in the psychiatric area. You deal with people who are having religious experiences, or spiritual experiences. Can you talk a little bit about the role in which a mental health professional would be working with a spiritual community in dealing with situations, cases of this kind?

SANNELLA: Well, ordinarily you don't have many of them in the first place. They are lesser states of intense prana, perhaps; prana is an energy that precedes, usually, the kundalini, or that simmers down to it.

MISHLOVE: You mean a full-fledged kundalini experience is still quite rare?

SANNELLA: Yes, it's quite rare. And ordinarily, the thing to do in a spiritual community, if you're a therapist, is first you have to get it in perspective, that people are not going to want to be tampered with in the psychiatric manner, and that's perfectly reasonable. But secondly, when you have people who are persistently, let us say, character disordered, or going back to drugs and alcohol and things like that persistently, and showing other gross signs of immaturity, then ordinary therapy can be very useful for them, and it should be not confused with whatever they're doing spiritually. But on the other hand, they will not probably advance on this particular path that they've chosen until they become more mature.

MISHLOVE: In other words, it sounds as if what you're saying is that normal psychotherapy, mental health intervention, often is to deal with a person on the level of their ego and how their ego is interacting with the world, whereas real spiritual work seems to go beyond the ego.

SANNELLA: Well, hopefully. I mean, often we think we are going beyond the ego, and are deluding ourselves. That's the most common. But in general, what you say is correct.

MISHLOVE: Earlier, when I asked you do you subscribe to or accept the theory of the chakras and the nadis, you said not quite; you said there are physiological events going on in the brain that have been interpreted this way by these cultures. To what extent do you think the people who are having these experiences that might lead them to a higher level of functioning, are being misled by the supermarket of Oriental spiritual traditions that are available?

SANNELLA: Oh, I don't think that they're misleading necessarily. I just think they are sort of cast in concrete. They're a little bit overdetermined. And so it leads people to expect a certain kind of sign to appear, and it may be very, very much different than that, because there's tremendous individual difference, not only in physiology, but in the cultural and spiritual backgrounds that people bring to this experience. And so the Kung people, for instance, and the Bushmen in South Africa, have a very similar experience, from their verbal descriptions, but it lacks a lot of the very elaborate descriptions that you read about in the classical kundalini. The Taoists, on the other hand, have sort of in between, because they have a model which is closer to our neurophysiological model than either the Kung or the classical yoga models.

MISHLOVE: So if a person were experiencing this kind of phenomenon, and they weren't already strongly committed to one tradition or another, it might be useful for them to look into Taoism.

SANNELLA: Well, yes, I would certainly think both classical Hinduism and Taoism.

MISHLOVE: But there's a sense in which what I hear you saying is that spiritual traditions in general differ from your approach, which is a little more scientific, insofar as they might be dogmatic and say this is the way our scriptures say the experience has been reported, rather than looking at the uniqueness of each situation. Lee, how do you think that this kundalini phenomenon reflects on our understanding of medicine in general, our understanding of the potentials of the human being? What can Western science really learn from all of this?

SANNELLA: Well, I think it brings us up very short and reminds us that participation in the universe is what all kinds of development is about, and that the linear, verbal, and logical mind and its usefulness is extremely limited and should not be indulged in endlessly and without relief, and that there's more in our philosophies than are dreamt of in the logical, linear mind, which has been overdone by our science and by our medicine, by our philosophy. Whatever it is, you name it, it's been overdone. And now we're going to have to learn the subtle language of all of those wonderful disciplines, because they are wonderful disciplines; but they all have a subtle language and a subtle occurrence and a participatory aspect which most of our professionals have shunned, and they're going to have to change or they're going to have to be left behind.

MISHLOVE: You spoke earlier about a change that occurs in the brain. How much does Western science know about this change?

SANNELLA: We don't know anything about it, and we don't even believe it exists. But we have a certain amount of laboratory evidence that it really does exist, and we certainly have all the clinical evidence in the world, in every psychic area, to know that they are real. They also can be faked. They're also exaggerated endlessly. They're also completely off-base; but they're also real, and there are a few of them that I have participated in, in my studies throughout the years, because I was very hardheaded as a scientist. I knew intuitively that all this stuff had something to it, but I'd never seen it nor felt it. So I went out and searched until I found these things and could confirm them for myself.

MISHLOVE: Many years ago a Hindu writer named Gopi Krishna wrote a book on kundalini, in which he suggested that this was the force that underlies great genius, and that by practicing yoga, having a kundalini experience, one could awaken great intellectual powers or great musical powers, the abilities of great genius. Do you think there's something to that argument?

SANNELLA: Well, I think it's a valid argument. I take certain exceptions to it, because he calls almost everything that is oddball kundalini, whether it's psychotic or whether it's genius.

MISHLOVE: You mean he might say, for example, by definition Mozart had experienced kundalini.

SANNELLA: Oh, of course, by definition, yes. But I would not necessarily agree with that. But that's just a technical difference. I don't think it's very important.

MISHLOVE: Basically you might say that if individuals were really interested in reaching out and finding out what are these higher levels of brain functioning, higher levels of mental functioning, that the practice of spiritual disciplines, apart from the dogmatic philosophies associated with them, would be a valuable pursuit.

SANNELLA: Well, yes, I think it's always valuable to develop your real and true and transcendent aspects.

MISHLOVE: Let me ask you a personal question, since you've brought this up. What kind of practices do you engage in, in this regard?

SANNELLA: Oh, I've engaged in so many different practices I would bore you to tears telling you about them, through my active search for --

MISHLOVE: Well, I know you and I were involved in Taoist yoga exercises together ten years ago.

SANNELLA: Absolutely. I've been in a dozen or more disciplines for years of each. I haven't looked at them in a cursory manner. But the search itself is a sign of certain fundamental work that hasn't been done in our psyches and our character and so forth.

MISHLOVE: What is that?

SANNELLA: Well, you see we are very reactive creatures, and even from the event of birth we have developed certain kinds of defenses and certain kinds of constrictions that push us into this ceaseless searching. And of course it's all here. You don't have to go any other place for it; it's all here, and it is hard to learn that lesson and to learn the disciplines that may help to evoke that and to make it real in yourself, so that you real-ize it, make it real.

MISHLOVE: If I can rephrase what you're saying, as a person who has been investigating gurus and following spiritual traditions and looking at it seriously, all over the world, as a matter of fact, for twenty years or more --

SANNELLA: More than that.

MISHLOVE: More than that. What you're saying is that your impetus, your desire to engage in this search, was a reflection of an inner emptiness, or an inner need of your own?

SANNELLA: Well, yes, I would say that. Inner need, yes.

MISHLOVE: And what you're saying actually is that there's a way of satisfying that inner need without searching all over the world.

SANNELLA: Yes, I would say that's true, but it's difficult.

MISHLOVE: Can you talk about that a little more?

SANNELLA: Well, spiritual practice is difficult at best -- in other words, when you have all the advantages, let us say with a very intuitive and sensitive organism, and one that easily enters into the various psychic realms and that has energies available, like the kundalini energy, for instance. There are others. There are visionary energies, there are psychic energies; they're all closely related. But it is difficult at best, when you make your world truly psychic, which means sacred, as I'm using it. And that is the whole thing, to make the world sacred -- every object in it, nature, all the animals, because they are inhabiting this planet just exactly the same as we are, and are just as essential as we are, but we don't see it that way.

MISHLOVE: We have this resistance that we touched on earlier. You said you didn't think this resistance was a good idea, and yet it almost seems instinctive.

SANNELLA: Oh, it is. The resistance comes just from being born. I mean, some of us get it in such a dramatic form that it's totally clear that that's what it is -- a certain kind of way we reacted when we were very small to our separation from mother, and separation from all those other people and beings out there who are all potential enemies when they are separate from us. But we are totally one with all of life, and that's what we have to relearn.

MISHLOVE: Without going on a thirty-year search around the world, are there other ways? How does one get through that resistance? How does one experience the more natural state?

SANNELLA: Well, for one thing, you find teachers or teachings that reflect in a clear, Western way for us Westerners what that's all about. And that's not easy, but it's available, and we don't have to suffer quite so much. But on the other hand, Westerners are very ill equipped to do spiritual

practice, and it's my experience, from myself, that we have tremendous resistance to surrendering and to communion with whatever you want to call it -- the Great Spirit, or the divine, or --

MISHLOVE: The infinite.

SANNELLA: The infinite, or the cosmos. It's all one to me. The words are just different labels.

MISHLOVE: Is there some sense in which we could maybe appreciate our resistance, even to the extent of kind of respecting it, nurturing the resistance itself as being a part of our divine nature?

SANNELLA: Well, it's a part of it, but it's a part of it that we have to really learn to deal with as early as possible and as intelligently as possible, and without the dramatics that are necessary in some cases, because I have some people, and even in myself, my insights into that particular resistance are continuing to unfold, even at my age. And somehow, those unfoldings have to be speeded up a bit, because the world needs open, free, expressive, connected people to turn it about from its present course of craziness.

MISHLOVE: Dr. Lee Sannella, you've really been able to express, from a medical point of view and from a personal point of view, the essence, I think, of kundalini experience, and beyond that, the essence of spiritual search. I would hope that the kind of work that you're doing will help to create the world that you've just described, Lee. Thank you very much for being with me.

SANNELLA: Thank you, Jeffrey.

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