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Sexuality, Esoteric Energies, and the Subtleties of Transmutation Versus Transformation

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Transpersonal perspectives on the meaningfulness of being human, and especially the significance of subtle energy teachings, necessitate a rethinking of the notion of sexuality, beyond definitions in terms of sex acts, biological endowments, or perhaps even the complex fantasia of desire. This redefining of the erotic dimension of human life leads both to appreciation of healing as inherently sexual and to understanding how the processes of transmutation by the forces of subtle energies profoundly differ from the transformations that representation of thoughts, feelings, and wishes may undergo. Cognitive access (including that of reflective self-consciousness) to these forces is inevitably limited and necessarily distorted. In this context, it is suggested that the esoteric traditions of mystical sexuality, including the teachings of authentic tantric practice, be reconsidered and appreciated for their transpersonal dimension.

Keywords: *sexuality, subtle energies, desire, transformation, transmutation, transpersonal perspectives, erotic healing, mystical sex, tantric meditation*

Lively debate continues on the object, scope, and methodologies of transpersonal psychology (e.g., Friedman & Hartelius, 2013; Krippner & Friedman, 2010). In this essay I will focus on exploring the relevance of studying the transpersonal force of subtle energies both for understanding human sexuality and, by extrapolation, for understanding the human capacities for healing. For the purposes of this essay, subtle energies will be speculatively theorized as an esoteric force that is neither purely physical nor purely mental, yet which flows within and between both domains. That is, felt experiences of flowing sensation have been postulated as possibly resulting from an energy that courses within physical forms (such as the connective tissue of the human body, vegetable life, and perhaps even inanimate objects), yet is not itself directly demonstrable; and also as an energy that animates the representations that comprise mental life (thoughts, feelings, wishes, fantasies, etc.), bringing them to consciousness yet not itself adequately captured in any particular thought formation (always eluding and exceeding cognitive capacities). This is a complex definition

and one that is contestable, but it will serve the purposes of this discussion.

A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Subtle Energies

The discernment of subtle energy systems, which both run within and interconnect embodied selves with each other and with the entire universe, has been central to almost all indigenous cosmologies and integral to what are known as Eastern philosophical and spiritual traditions. Here I am including doctrines such as those concerning *prāṇā* and associated notions in the Sanātana Dharma lineages (Vedic, Jain, Buddhist), *chi* in Chinese and particularly Taoic teachings, *ki* in Japanese, *lom* in Thai, and many others (such as *mana* in some Oceanic cultures, *orenda* for some Native American groups, and *od* in ancient Germanic cultures). Certain threads of teachings that form the Kabbalist, Gnostic, and Sufi lineages should also be included under this rubric. In this regard, the image of Spirit-as-Messenger, which is shared by all three versions of Abrahamic religion (consider also

Bahá'u'lláh's Maid-of-Heaven), may be of particular interest.

Teachings about *pṛāṇā* and related notions have become increasingly available to North Atlantic cultures over the past two centuries. The strong philological tradition in mid-Europe at the end of the 18th century made available (at least to the intelligentsia) major texts from the Sanātana Dharmic traditions (notably the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, as well as Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*), including many from the Sanskrit and Pali literatures of Buddhist doctrine. Translations of Confucian and Taoic texts also became available. The eminent German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, was deeply impressed by Vedantic and Buddhist literatures and, in his 1818 *opus magnum*, wrote about the somewhat esoteric notion of *Wille zum Leben* (will-to-live or will-to-life), the metaphysical existence of which governs all observable phenomena, including the individual's actions and desires (Schopenhauer, 1818/1966). Schopenhauer's ideas influenced over a century of European thinking, including not only that of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, but also Henri-Louis Bergson's 1907 philosophy of *élan vital* or life-force (Bergson, 1907/2011), and later the scientific philosophizing of Erwin Schrödinger (e.g., 1944), as well as the mythological investigations of Joseph Campbell (e.g., 1959–1968/1976). In the 1960s there was a momentous popularization of interest in subtle energy teachings throughout Europe and North America (as well as in many other aspects of indigenous and Eastern spiritual practices). It was in this milieu both that transpersonal psychology was established (cf. Grof, 2008) and that somatic psychology, along with many variants of bodymind therapy, emerged (cf. Barratt, 2010).

Since the 1960s, there has been an upsurge of efforts to prove the existence of subtle energy systems within the rational and referential paradigmatics of "normal" or "official science" (e.g., Swanson, 2003, 2010; Tiller, 1997, 2001, 2007). However, within this hegemonic masterdiscourse of mainstream research, which has dominated the Western world for the past three to five hundred years, scientists have by and large continued to ignore or deny any such esoteric dimension of

human life. This disaffirmation persists despite the burgeoning literature on the unobservable complexities disclosed by relativity and quantum theory.

There is a diversity of insights covered by all these different teachings about subtle energy systems, such that it is perhaps an error to consider them under the same rubric, as if they constituted a monolithic canon. Because of its substantial relevance to the issue of human sexuality, what I want to emphasize here is how Freud's innovative method of *freier Einfall* (falling into the spontaneous streaming of consciousness, or "free-association"), by which he ascertained the movements of what he called *libidinality*, constitutes a unique and more or less independent discovery of a subtle energy system within the Western intellectual tradition. Freud was deeply impressed by Schopenhauer, had read the *Gita* and could quote from the *Upanishads*, consulted with the Swiss novelist and Hindu admirer Bruno Goetz, had lively debates with Romain Rolland about spiritual experience or "oceanic feelings," conversed with Rabindranath Tagore, had some quite extensive discussions with Yaekichi Yabe about Buddhism and psychology, and corresponded extensively with Girindrasekar Bose on matters that dipped into South Asian cosmology (cf. Vaidyanathan & Kripal, 1999). His discovery of a method that could "follow the libido into its hideouts" (as cited in Sterba, 1982) merits the legend of radical originality (Barratt, 2013a, 2016). Contrary to its description by some commentators, *freier Einfall* is not so much an unexpurgated sequence of narratives that might "make sense," but more like babbling in a "free" or seemingly random manner that regularly contravenes the rules and regulations that govern ordinary sense-making. It entails a voluntary surrender or submission (*'islām*, implying both resignation and reconciliation) to a meaningfulness that is *other* than what is known, or indeed that is *otherwise* than the regulations and rules of representationality, which constitute the law and order of the knowable. That is, otherwise than that which can be articulated cogently, coherently, or comprehensively. This is a listening, or attending to, and an appreciation of what might be called the "radically unsayable" (cf. Budick & Iser, 1989). I shall

not repeat here the more detailed exploration of this topic presented in my 2016 essay on free-associative praxis (and the writings that preceded it), except to underscore how the possibility of such listening is secured by a method of negativity in relation to the conventions of saying or speaking that makes-sense. The significance of this *via negativa* (which is John Keats' term) is that of a negatively dialectical engagement with the compulsive repetitiousness of self-consciousness, a deconstructive challenge to the manifest text of what one thinks that one knows (Barratt, 1984/2016, 1993/2016). That is, the method of free-association comprises a subversive momentum in relation to apparent certainties—the law and order of representationality within which one lives—in order to allow fresh and lively eruptions and disruptions of subtle energy within.

On the basis of his clinical and personal experience with the processes of *freier Einfall*, Freud had to postulate the operation of a force within the person that he called *psychic energy* or *libidinality* (or *Triebe*). This notion actually subverts the entire Cartesian tradition—so it must be noted here that the significance of this discovery has been conveniently expunged in the theorizing promulgated by most subsequent so-called psychoanalysts, who claim to follow in his footsteps. If one regresses back to the Cartesian worldview, one sees the human condition only in terms of, on the one side, the representations of *mind* (of thoughts, feelings, wishes, articulated in consciousness, or yet-to-be so articulated, and thus potentially available to the reflectivity of self-consciousness) and then, on the other side, the biological mechanisms of the *body* (neurological, and so forth). The connectivity of mind and body remains an issue of mythematic speculation, yet their empirical interdependence should not lead one to assume the intertranslatability of their modes of discourse (cf. Barratt, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). However, beyond Cartesian dualism, Freud posited a third mode of discourse by advancing his notion of subtle energy that operates, as he understood it, *between* the discourse of biology (anatomical structures and physiological functions) and the discourse of psychology (representationality).

Freud insisted throughout his career that the method of free-associative listening defined

his discipline and he was consistently forthright both about the significance of his discovery of libidinality and about how the method could bring fresh investments of psychic energy into psychic functioning. In short, although his collected writings are replete with speculations on many other topics and substantially, and especially after 1915, with the enterprise of building grand models of mental functioning, Freud was clear—although not stating the issue in this contemporary terminology—that his method provokes deconstructive or negatively dialectical transformations and transmutations that render one more open to listening, attending, and appreciating the momentum of subtle energies within (Barratt, 2017); here I am contrasting the notions of a transformation, which occurs essentially between forms of a similar ontological status (e.g., one thought transformed into another thought, as hydrogen and oxygen are transformed into water), and of a transmutation, in which there is a change in ontological status (e.g., a neuronal network's activation into a mental image). Opposing the notion of psychosynthesis (as well as of any over-attachment to interpretive insight) as a potential warding-off, closing-over, or arresting the kinesis of libidinality (i.e., treating psychosynthesis and overly integrative modes of interpretation as modes of defensiveness against libidinality), Freud insisted on the term *analysis* for his discipline. He meant this not in the sense of a logical analysis, but rather in the sense of a chemical analysis that breaks a compound down into its elements so that they may freely recombine themselves. Seven specific aspects of Freud's views on psychic energies need to be noted here.

1. Although Freud called the notion of subtle energy a *Hilfsvorstellung* (literally a helpful or provisional idea), he insisted that this notion of *Triebe* ("drives" or the psychic energies of libidinality) is necessary for an understanding of the human bodymind, given the findings of his distinctive method. He viewed *Triebe* as helpful or indeed essential for any future research (even if the notion might be no more than provisional). Freud (1913) wrote frequently of psychic energy or *Triebe* as a "boundary" notion intimating a force that mediates, or operates between, the psychological

and the biological—"ausgiebige Vermittlung zwischen der Biologie und der Psychologie" (pp. 410–411). This is an issue brilliantly elaborated by Jean Laplanche (1992–1993/1999, 2000–2006/2011). Freud thus offered a depiction of what I have called the "threefold character" of the bodymind: (i) the anatomical structures and physiological functions of body, the biological habitat, including all the aspects studied by neuroscience; (ii) the representational system of thoughts, feelings, and wishes, called mind, the psychological habitat; and (iii) a force that flows *between* them and yet is, given Freud's stance, equivalent to neither. In anticipation one may note here that it is this streaming force that is principally relevant to the issue of transpersonal communication and exchange, in so far as subtle energies might flow between the bodymind of one individual and another (or between an individual and the cosmos, in a mystical sense). In sum, Freud posed a threefold ontology of the human being-in-the-world in which *Trieb*, as a subtle energy, is "in but not of" physical forms and "in but not of" the representations conceived of, and reflected upon, as forming one's mental world (Barratt, 1993/2016, 2016a, 2017).

2. In all his public writings, Freud clearly assumed that libidinality is an endogenous system that is only to be found operating within the physical being. This assumption may have made the notion of *Triebe* more palatable to the mainstream science of his day—especially because this notion of *drive* quickly became conflated with, or collapsed into, the biological concept of "instinct" and thence with later ethological work on "modal-action" or "fixed-action" patterns that are innate. However, Freud actually did not hold the assumption of the endogenous condition of *Triebe* all that firmly. He secretly believed in telepathy, although he told this only to a few selected confidants. As a mode of communication that does not depend on the physicality of the five known human senses, Freud might aptly have understood this phenomenon as an operation of subtle energy. Instead, he very peculiarly insisted to Ernest Jones that his conviction was his "own affair" and that "the subject of telepathy is not related to psychoanalysis" (Freud & Jones, 1908–1939/1995, Letter of March 7th 1926, italics omitted). Thus, it is perhaps curious

that in public Freud held fast to the endogenous/exogenous distinction, refusing to entertain the possibility that the movement of subtle energies might not be monadologically circumscribed within our physical body. As is well known, Jung was more equivocal on this point. He tended to understand such energies as cosmic rather than body-bound and, although he used the terms "energy" and "libido" more or less interchangeably, he resisted Freud's emphasis on the erotic character of these energies (Freud & Jung, 1906–1914/1974; Jung, 1912/2011, 1913–1915, 1913–1935, 1920). Also to be noted here, as an aside, is that Wilhelm Reich not only asserted the sexual character of such energies, but eventually understood them to be cosmic, and insisted on their observable and indeed measurable condition (Conger, 1988/2005; Reich, 1927–1953/1960, 1933/1961, 1942/1986, 1948/1998).

3. Freud further assumed that the subtle energies of *Triebe* operated conservatively within the bodymind, according to principles that might characterize a closed "hydraulic" system. These principles are basically Newtonian and characterized the physics of Freud's time, although for him they were especially influenced by Hermann Helmholtz (e.g., 1885). Given the epoch in which he labored, Freud could not have considered the possibility of an economy based on expansiveness, liberation, release, or sacrificial giving. Such economies are now known to us, not least from the scholarship of Marcel Mauss on gifting economies or of his successors Georges Bataille and René Girard on sacrificial economies—let alone from the scholarship of the feminist psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray, on the infrastructure of economies that are founded on unremunerated nurturing. It must be noted here that, to my knowledge, almost all ancient wisdom traditions that offer insight into the movements of subtle energy characterize it as more or less inexhaustibly renewable, opening humans to the connectedness of the universe, rather than rendering us discontinuous from it, and certainly not conforming to restrictive Newtonian principles of conservation and so forth (Barratt, 2015a).

4. Freud's earliest psychoanalytic experiments compelled him to appropriate Johann Herbart's term "repression" to describe the expulsion

of ideas and wishes from the accessible scope of representational consciousness. At the culmination of almost twenty years of working and playing with free-associative processes, Freud argued in 1915 that, when a representation is "suppressed" (*unterdrückt*), it maintains its form as an idea or wish (as a "word-representation" or *Wortvorstellung*), becoming descriptively unconscious (that is, "preconscious" or even "deeply preconscious"). Such word-representations are archived, so that they may be translated back into the purview of self-consciousness (albeit with some modification in the course of such a transformative translation). However, when an idea or wish is "repressed" (*verdrängt*, in Freud's sense of "literal repression") it loses its representational form as it crosses what Freud called the "repression-barrier" (*Verdrängungsschranke*) and deteriorates into "thing-presentations" (*Sachvorstellung* or *Dingvorstellung*). Unlike archival memories, the latter persist as embodied traces, impulses, or sparks—a commotion that can appropriately be envisaged as the shifting of subtle energy charges. They are unconscious, but in a far stronger sense than is implied by the merely descriptive use of this term. They persist as *ur-representational* or formless impulses that maintain their own distinctive quality of quasi-intentionality. One way of understanding this is to consider subtle energies as far too wild, chaotic and free, for any adequate or sufficient translation back into the law and order of representationality. But they can also remain frozen in embodied experience, especially in contractions of soft tissue, in the manner so interestingly described by Reich (e.g., 1927–1953/1960, 1933/1950). This does not, however, mean that thing-presentations are inactive or without impact. Rather, their movement (and indirectly their lack of movement) fuels, or blocks by not fueling in certain directions, the stream of consciousness (this is what I am calling their "quasi-intentionality," their capacity to invest in representations in a sometimes evident, often seemingly irrelevant and *as if* random, manner). As free-association demonstrates, these energies insist themselves, eruptively and disruptively, upon the formation and transformation of representations by condensation and displacement (metaphor and metonym), which is entailed by the streaming of consciousness.

That thing-presentations cannot be adequately or sufficiently translated back into representational form is why Freud called repression a "failure of translation" (in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated December 6th 1896; Freud & Fliess, 1887–1904/1985). Thing-presentations forever elude and exceed the representational manifestations that they fuel and they can only be intuited within the sense-making system of representationality, precisely because they eruptively and persistently disrupt the capacity of that system to make-sense and to make-nothing-but-sense. *Desire*, which might be an apt name for the churning, quivering, vibrating waves of thing-presentations within, can never be captured adequately or sufficiently within the formulations of the representational "mind," but appears continuously in deferred or displaced moments of subtle energy effusions that are forever enigmatic and extraordinary, yet animative, in relation to reflective self-consciousness (Barratt, 1993/2016; cf. Quindeau, 2013). Thing-presentations are indeed messages about experience, but are forever elusively enigmatic.

5. In 1920, Freud made a final contribution to this reading of his psychodynamic ideas about subtle energies. Although the main essay he published that year has been subject to much divergent interpretation, my suggestion, which follows that of Laplanche, is that he offered two complementary and foundational principles. He posited a principle of "lifeliness" (*Lebenstreib*) in which psychic energies invest themselves both in the functions of representationality with all its systemic transformations and also presumably in the functions of biological operations. Then there is a principle of "deathfulness" (*Todestreib*), in which psychic energies withdraw or disinvest themselves from these functions, as if in an entropic movement. Every moment of one's lived-experience involves *both* the momentum of lifeliveness *and* the momentum of deathfulness, at least in as much as, when one representation is impelled into consciousness fueled by an investment of subtle energy, that energy is being disinvested from another. Life is, as Freud may have learned from Sabina Spielrein's (1912) essay, an ongoing reciprocal movement of creation and destruction. Thus, when the repression-barrier is, for

want of a better term, "interrogated" by means of the free-associative method, a greater force of lifefulness (and, concomitantly of deathfulness) characterizes lived-experience. Free-associating patients may or may not come to understand themselves more fully (in the sense of formulating insights, by which they *know about* themselves), but they certainly become more *alive!* In this respect, my standpoint leads me to be adamant that, if patients do not become more *alive* (that is, experience themselves more fully), then psychoanalysis, by which I mean an ongoing commitment to free-associative discourse, is not the treatment being engaged. The psychoanalytic process invariably has effects on the physicality of the subject—unless, of course, it has deteriorated into an ideocentric procedure of "sense-making," in which case it falls short of the radicality of a genuinely psychoanalytic process.

6. As can be inferred from the above considerations, Freud does not anticipate that there could ever be relief from the rupture of the repression-barrier within the psyche. He does not hold out the promise of harmonious and integrated personhood. Yet this is a promise that has beguiled so many allegedly therapeutic practices, from the Jungian technique of "active imagination" and the practitioners of "height psychology," to all the contemporary New Age variants (cf. Barratt, 2017, 2019a). This is notably true of all those theories of therapy that are founded on an ideocentric and ideogenic model of the functioning of the psyche (including variants of so-called psychoanalytically oriented therapy that over-emphasize insight, adaptation or maturation). By contrast, Freud's appreciation of subtle energies and his emphasis on free-association as the *sine qua non* of his discipline renders psychoanalysis a somatocentric and somatogenic vision of the human condition and of its potential for liberation. Indeed, Freud indicts ambitions toward unity or transcendence as a delusional ideal that actually deflects away from the potentiality of healing. There is no ultimate compatibility, concordance, or congruence to be had between representationality and *desire*. That is, between the system of thoughts or wishes that are, or can be, articulated (and that are thus governed by the law and order of representationality) and

desire as the restless movement of psychic energy or libidinality. The latter flows within and also perhaps through the person, holding a necessary but anarchic relation to the representations in which it is invested, but with which it is inherently somewhat discordant or contradictory. The human condition is ruptured by a dynamic of contradictoriness between voices that are represented or representable and those that manifest a meaningfulness that is *otherwise* than the representable.

7. What is evident from the preceding points is that Freud discovered the subtle energies of libidinality as *interminably nonidentical* with, on the one side, the materiality of the biological being and, on the other side, the representationality of the psyche. Subtle energies are not identical with physical operations (such as anatomical structures or physiological functions). But here it must be noted that, whether or not one subscribes to the endogenous perspective that Freud, at least in public, insisted on advancing, few if any people have suggested that subtle energies exist independent of all materiality. Even if telepathic communication were to be proven to everyone's satisfaction, the energetic connection that is implied surely requires the physical composition of the atmosphere between those in communication. In the psychoanalytic context, Laplanche, by developing Freud's notion of *Anlehnung*, has provided a cogent account of how libidinality comes into lived-experience by leaning-on, being propped-upon or following-from the materiality of biological operations. As I elaborated in the previous point, the same consideration applies to the relations between subtle energy and the system of representations that are considered to be "mind"—these *different* discourses are never in a relation of concordance or identity. Investments of libidinality are necessary for the formation and transformation of representations. Yet no representation, even if it is *about* libidinal energy or *desire*, actually expresses the investment by which it was formed, transformed, and brought into the purview of self-consciousness. Indeed, as indicated above, subtle energy may animate the inner theater of representations but—as the free-associative method demonstrates—it does so elusively, excessively, and exuberantly. In short, the nonidentity of subtle energy and

the thoughts and wishes that can be articulated is evident in terms of the incessant incompleteness of every possible thought and wish, as well as by the eruptive and disruptive effects of desire upon the claims of representationality ever to be able to make complete sense. The subtle energy that one might call "desire" gives the lie to the distinctively Western ambition of the modern era that has held, at least since Georg Hegel's 1807 *opus magnum*, that absolute knowledge, complete unto itself, might ever be achievable. In short, one's *desire* can never be fulfilled (although it can perhaps be temporarily "fobbed off" by approximative satisfactions).

Thinking about Sexuality

There can be no question that Freud was a pioneer of the discipline of sexology and, at the culmination of this essay, I will suggest how his discoveries lead to transpersonal ways of understanding and enjoying sexuality, both which are ancient in their association with the traditions of mystical sexual-spirituality (that is, the erotic modes of meditation propounded, most notably, within Tantric and Taoic lineages) and yet which continue to be resisted in modern North Atlantic cultures, whose ethos of "sexification" is now more or less globalized (cf. Barratt, 2005, 2006, 2009; Meldman, 1990; Mollenkott, 1993; Murphy, 2006). However, before proceeding to that topic, it must be understood how, against psychoanalytic insight, much of the discipline of sexology has labored under definitions of sexuality that need to be critically reviewed, in order to be abrogated. Historically, the mainstream definitions of sexuality prevalent in North Atlantic cultures have always been infected with religious moralizing from the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition and have focused on the procreative dimension of intercourse. Even contemporarily, there is a strong tendency to define sexuality in terms of behavior or biology. Yet neither definitional track succeeds in addressing adequately the central concern of *sexuality as a lived-experience* (even if an inherently fearful and intrinsically contradictory or conflictual one).

Behaviorally, one tends to think of sexuality in terms of particular acts, notably penile-vaginal intercourse, which is taken to be the "real thing" (thus

implicitly demoting gay and lesbian activities as if deviant) along with, as if only derivatively, its frequent accompaniments such as kissing, cunnilingus, fellatio, and anal pleasuring. Defining sexuality as a set of behaviors is actually a problematic approach to a coherent and comprehensive study of the topic for at least three reasons. First, the definitional circumscription of the set is difficult—a challenge that one might call "body-locational." Is a kiss on the lips "sexual" but if on the cheek, such as performed between two diplomats or offered to your great aunt on her birthday, it is not? Second, moral and cultural values have almost invariably infused the designation of particular acts. Penile-vaginal intercourse is often portrayed as a "natural act"—perhaps the epitome of such acts—and is customarily approved if performed between marital partners (and sometimes approved if performed extramaritally or even if performed as rape). By contrast, penile-anal or oral-genital "sodomous" contact has often been condemned as "unnatural," sinful, deviant, and even illegal. So, it is not scientifically valid to dissociate an act or behavior from the meanings culturally attributed to it. For example, nose-rubbing has substantially different significance for an Inuit than it does for a Cherokee. Lip kissing is widely practiced across the world, but tonguing is tabooed for groups that have a prohibition against any possible exchange of saliva (a few groups, such as the Tsonga of southern Africa find all mouth-to-mouth contact repulsive). Third, it is also an error to dissociate a behavioral act from the intentionality of its participants—the meanings attributed to it on individual levels, as well as general or cultural ones. Understandably, many contemporary commentators argue that rape is not a sexual act (e.g., Moss, 2016). Indeed, it is difficult to see the validity of placing, for example, the systematic penile-vaginal rape of women as a military strategy of genocide (impregnating women and infecting them with HIV) in the same category as that of two lovers tenderly pleasuring each other under a tranquil moon. In short, thinking about sexuality in terms of behaviors (without prioritizing inquiry into the meaningfulness of those behaviors) is a limited strategy, ultimately a failing one.

Biologically, one can try to define sexuality in one of two ways. First, there is the ethological-evolutionary framework which studies sexuality

for its reproductive significance. Indeed, there is great interest to be had in investigating animal pair-bonding, courtship, and copulation behaviors, as well as parenting patterns. The fact, for example, that sexual behaviors between same-sex dyads have been documented in between five hundred to two thousand species, from gut worms and griffon vultures to bottlenose dolphins, giraffes, lions, and bonobo apes, seems a significant counter to the argument that the singular purpose of sexual behavior is reproduction or that homosexuality is "unnatural" (Bagemihl, 1999). However, there are strong reasons to understand such patterns of animal behavior as *instinctual* (rather than imaginative); that is, governed by modal-action (or fixed-action) patterns that are triggered by "innate releaser mechanisms." Animals commit sex acts somewhat automatically, whereas for humans such acts are invariably more complexly governed than by instinct—for, as I will soon elaborate, unlike animals, all human sexual activities are tied to fantasies. The second biological approach to the definition of sexuality focuses on the physiological mechanisms involved. The importance of studies in this field is not to be underestimated. Much of great value has been learned about the human estrous cycle, the mechanisms of arousal and climax, the risks of sexually transmitted infections, and so forth. However, it is obvious that such research remains somewhat remote from any inquiry into the lived-experience of human sexual expression. In relation to this point, one may note that, when a person is feeling erotically aroused, rarely, if ever, does he or she care much about the instrumentality or mechanisms of vasocongestive responses.

Thus, to understand human sexuality, definitions focusing on behavioral or biological aspects have limitations in so far as the essential dimension of the phenomena is definitionally and systematically overlooked. For our species, if sexuality is to be studied as a lived-experience, then the definitional focus has to be on the individual's systems and vicissitudes of *erotic fantasy*. Sexology cannot avoid what Adams (2004) called the "fantasy principle." To study human behavior without attending to the underlying fantasy life is a very limited strategy that has, especially in the field of sexology,

generally reduced the value of much social science since the late 19th century. Indeed, such limitations were anticipated by Otto Rank and Hanns Sachs as early as 1913. Fantasy is the essential foundation of human erotics that should not be avoided merely because the behavioral and biological features of sexuality are more readily observable and thus easier to research objectively. The findings of psychoanalysis demonstrate the complexity of scientific investigation into any aspect of human fantasy life and show why the study of erotic fantasy is especially challenging (cf. Bader, 2002; Morin, 1995; Segal, 1995; Steiner, 2003). That is, even more challenging than the extant methodology of collecting and analyzing thematically the subjective material that individuals report, as was done famously by Shere Hite, Nancy Friday, and many others (Friday, 1973, 1975, 1980; Hite, 1976, 1987). There are three reasons for the serious difficulties in studying fantasy life and they explain why the prevailing scientific literature on human sexuality falls short of its ambitions.

First, although some sexual fantasies may be conscious, individuals are often ashamed to divulge them. Even if interviewees are forthcoming, they are almost invariably unable to articulate why the particular content of the fantasy is erotically charged. It is impressive how, when people are questioned about their conscious fantasy life, they quickly become inarticulate about the desire that animates it (using "desire" here in the ordinary sense of the term). For example, a patient or research subject volunteers "I found the sway of her hips as she walked past me very exciting" or "I was aroused by the slope of his shoulders as he leaned casually against the wall." The person is then asked, "why that particular sway of the hips?" or "what was it about the slope of the shoulders?" and so forth. It quickly becomes clear that the subject is aware of excitement or arousal but can rarely give any sort of cogent or coherent account as to why the event triggering these reactions had this specific allure. I once conducted an informal experiment along these lines with heterosexually active male students, asking them to select from a popular "nudies" magazine a particular image that they considered "hot." When asked why the woman depicted was

experienced this way, the response was often dumbfounded, although sometimes a fantasy of action or a reference to anatomy or physiology would be divulged (e.g., "well because I'd like to fuck her" or "I always like hourglass figures" or "well because the sight of her makes my penis get harder"). However, follow-up questions (e.g., "but why does she specifically make you want to fuck her?" or "what is it about hourglass figures?" or "why does she in particular make your penis engorge?") would almost invariably be met with exasperation (e.g., "she just *is* hot, man!" or "don't *you* get it?"). I have also performed this experiment on myself and, despite many years in psychoanalysis, my account of why it is that a particular event elicited my erotic attention or provoked my sexual imagination often seems rather limited in its depth or even credibility. Clearly, even when it is recognizable to reflective consciousness, *sexual desire is quite mysterious to us*. We never know very much, if anything, about why we desire what we desire.

Second, some sexual fantasies may be conscious, but many are not. In psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically-oriented therapy, the following is a commonplace sort of example. At the beginning of treatment, an ostensibly heterosexual man acknowledges his pleasure in watching erotic imagery. Specifically, he regularly enjoys internet videos of a man being fellated enthusiastically by a beautiful woman. The patient considers himself "totally hetero," and his history involves neither homosexual contact nor conscious homoerotic fantasies. However, as his treatment deepens, it becomes evident that, as he watches these scenes of fellatio, he is not only wishing to be the man being fellated, but also wishing—on some deeply preconscious or descriptively unconscious level—to be the one who enthusiastically enjoys licking and sucking the penis. That is to say, it is very frequently discovered, in the course of psychoanalytic treatments, that the consciously-held erotic fantasy gratifies, at one and the same time, additional fantasies of which the patient is wholly unaware. Overtly heterosexual activity can disguisedly satisfy covertly homosexual impulses, and vice versa. The forbidden and disguised aspect of these fantasies can be articulated (even

if initially resisted and denied by the patient). So, although such hidden aspects of psychic life are often described as having been "unconscious," as I have argued previously it is more precise to claim that they were deeply preconscious—that is, suppressed—and then brought to the conscious surface by the process of psychoanalytic inquiry.

Third, these two representational components of erotic life, conscious and deeply preconscious fantasies, are both fueled by fluctuating and shifting investments of libidinality or subtle energy. That is, the force of thing-presentations that defy representationality yet erupt within it disruptively. Libidinal investments are not random and, in this respect, the subtle energies within embodied experience, which animate the representational components of psychic life, cannot be said to be neutral. Moreover, they are not fully under the control of a person's—somewhat delusional—sense of conscious agency. The latter point is illustrated by the common fact that, if you are not feeling "sexy," you may be able to induce such a feeling by consciously entertaining one of your favorite fantasies, but often—and this is surely a very important point—you also may not succeed. The embodied traces (impulses or sparks that are to be envisaged as the commotional shifting of subtle energy charges within) are, in a very important sense, erotic fantasies in a non-representational modality. As having been repressed within, they are traces of erotic events that one can no longer remember and cannot represent; yet they are surely vital to the aliveness of one's sexual life.

The Distinction between Transmutative and Transformative Change

If postulation of subtle energy systems is admitted as helpful or even necessary, the understanding of the human condition shifts paradigmatically, affecting not only how one understands the lived-experience of sensual expression, but also how the work and play of healing is apprehended. However, to comprehend this shift, it is necessary to distinguish transformative change from transmutative change. I have suggested that the human condition is composed of three nonidentical and untranslatable modes of discourse: the materiality of biological

structures and functions typically identified as the "body," the representational system or systems commonly called the "mind," and the subtle energies that flow between these two realms. I suggest that much confusion in scientific literature could be avoided if the term *transformation* were reserved for changes that occur within a discursive mode and if the term *transmutation* were then promoted for changes that occur between discursive modes.

One example of transformation would be the changes occurring in brain functions, specifically patterns of metabolic activity, as a result of psychodynamic therapy. Such changes can be reliably observed by positron emission tomography ("PET scans" CITE). Another example, which I just mentioned, would be the ostensibly heterosexual man, who comes to find that one aspect of his enjoyment of watching heterosexual fellatio is that it gratifies his recondite wish to be the fellator who enjoys licking and sucking the penis. Such changes in the representations the patient has of his "self" and his sexual feelings are regularly observed in psychoanalytic treatment.

By contrast, the processes of transmutation are never observable, only inferable. When a biological event results in a shifting of those subtle energies that "lean-on," are "propped-upon" or "follow-from" the materiality of the event, some sort of transmutative change has occurred. When the vicissitudes of subtle energy prompt a shifting of biological events (as is well known in psychoanalysis and in the many varieties of energetic and transpersonal healing practices), some sort of transmutative change has occurred. When the representational events result in a shifting of the subtle energies that are invested in them (but always without equivalence or identity), this is also a transmutative shift. In one direction, representational defenses against the momentum of subtle energies routinely result in psychosomatic symptoms. In the other direction, as previously mentioned, representational changes that occur in psychoanalysis (the famous aphorism of "where *It* was, should *I* become" or "making the unconscious conscious" and so forth) regularly render the patient more *alive!* As I have suggested, what the method of free-association demonstrates is that the vicissitudes

of subtle energy or libidinality continually impact the stream of conscious representationality, but never compatibly, concordantly, or congruently (that is, always non-identically). Rather, *desire* as psychic energy contradictorily erupts and disrupts the logical and rhetorical law and order of the representational system—and is thus always elusive, excessive, and exuberant. Such intrusions are, in a certain sense, indicative of the transmutative impact of subtle energy on what is commonly called the mind—an impact that is between nonidentical modes of discourse, rather than within a particular mode.

Conventional science has focused only on transformations that occur within a particular discourse. The relations of one discourse to another—notably, ideas about how consciousness emerges from materiality—have necessarily been relegated to mythematic speculation, as I have discussed elsewhere (e.g., Barratt, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Even if the transmutative processes between discourses remain mysterious, it is ill-advised, especially for those open to considering the transpersonal dimensions of human life, to shrink back from the notion of transmutation, just because it might seem not unlike the now disreputable protoscience of alchemy (cf. von Franz, 1979, 1980; Holmyard, 1957/1990; Linden, 2003; Principe, 2013). However, what is suggested here is that the authentic processes of healing—by which I mean processes that are more profound than the procedures of symptom removal, remedy or palliation—require the transmutation of subtle energies and not just the transformation of physical or mental structures. This is not an issue that can be explored in the brevity of this essay. However, with the sometimes problematic advances of allopathic medicine and the technical refinements of manipulative procedures of behavioral change, I think it has become evident that healing the human condition requires something more than, and spiritually greater than—to give just a few examples—the squashing of a bacterial outbreak by medication, the excision of a cancerous tumor by surgery, the ablation of obsessive or phobic patterns of thinking by cognitive behavioral treatment, or the attenuation of delusional thinking by administration

of chlorpromazine. It is not that one should be against such techniques *in toto*, but rather, as I have argued elsewhere (e.g., Barratt, 2010, 2019a), that it is essential to understand healing as far more than the avoidance of pain, the avoidance of mortality, or the pursuit of so-called mature adaptation to political and sociocultural environments (that are themselves, more often than not, intrinsically inhumane). Genuine healing requires the transmutative involvement of the subtle energies that account both for the "lifeliness" and the "deathfulness" of one's being-in-the-world. It requires an openness to the subtle energies, the libidinality, that seems to flow within and all around.

A Note on the Terrifying Prospect of Sexual Intensification

In an essay first written and censored by state authorities in 1966, Leszek Kolakowski (1966/1972) discussed the profound problems inherent in the development of what he called the "culture of analgesics"—a culture that has become more or less wholly globalized in the subsequent half century. Palliation, which is motivated by the analgesic attitude toward life itself, valorizes comfort and contentment, seeking the removal of all that interferes with these conditions without concern for the significance of the interference. The attitude of palliation is simply against pain, against death, and against nonconformity. It favors whatever transformations of body and mind implement these oppositional stances. By contrast, healing, without revering the status of suffering, seeks to understand appreciatively its significance and thus to move toward its transcendence. In this sense, healing necessarily involves the transmutation of subtle energies within and through the bodymind. Healing is inherently sexual, in as much as sexuality, whether appreciated on the level of activities or on the level of fantasies, involves the potential for transcendent movements of subtle energy. However, before these propositions can be discussed further, it is necessary to consider why healing and the intensification of sexuality, particularly in the way it offers the prospect of transcendent orgasmicity, is resisted by nearly everyone.

It perhaps seems paradoxical to discuss the pervasive and fundamental fears of sexuality in an

epoch in which images of, and references to, sex acts and human erotics are increasingly on the cultural surface of everyday life—particularly in the North Atlantic orbit, but now almost everywhere due to the globalization of Western practices across the planet. What I have called the "sexification" of life in the United States is both a compulsive obsession with "sex" and an equally compulsive phobic reaction against such obsessiveness—and both are ultimately based on the fear of erotic intensity (Barratt, 2005). The brevity of this paper prevents further discussion of these sociological and historical effects, but rather requires a focus on the reasons that eroticism is terrifying, especially in its intensification.

To reiterate: It is not just that sexuality involves movements of subtle energies; rather, it must be understood, sexuality *is* the movement of these energies and that these energies are, in a profound sense that should not be ignored, inherently sexual. Subtle energy movements occur both within and through the biological and the behavioral realms of "sex acts," but most significantly they occur within and through the transformation and transmutation of three levels of fantasies, which are the conscious or (deeply) preconscious discourse of representational fantasies and the kinesis of "ur-fantasies" as the animative movement of thing-presentations. Such movements surely occur both within the person as an individual and (if one is able to relinquish Freud's uneasy insistence on the impermeability of the endogenous/exogenous demarcation) it is possible also to be open to appreciating their flow between the person and other entities. I will return to the latter point shortly. Some subtle energy movements may be relatively free-flowing, others may be comparatively blocked or stifled. That is, subtle energies are bound or unbound, to greater or lesser degree, in three ways: (i) by material or bodily structures and functions, including body boundaries; (ii) by representational forms (conscious and deeply preconscious); and (iii) by the "ur-representational" fantasies of traces, impulses or sparks of thing-presentations, which are most like churning, quivering, vibrating, commotional waves of some form of energy. This is the key to appreciating the terror of sexual intensification

because the unbinding of subtle energy (as in Freud's notion of the deathfulness principle or *Todestrieb*) spells death, at least for one's egotism or habitual "ego organization."

Thus, sexuality is profoundly linked with death and we are necessarily afraid of its intensification (here "we" refers to ourselves as ego organizations, our sense of ourselves as each having a "self" and so forth). Concretely, the association of sexuality and death can be considered in terms both of the significance of the incest taboo and of the potential to "lose our minds."

In terms of the incest taboo, it is relevant to note how the sensual foundation for one's erotic life as an individual is established with their earliest caretakers. It is a sensual connectivity, the significance of which is repressed (cf. Wolf & Durham, 2004). Thus, as I have discussed extensively elsewhere (Barratt, 2012, 2016, 2019a, 2019b), this is the inestimable importance of what Freud called the "repression-barrier," which is essentially the intrapsychic inscription of the incest taboo that is necessary to contain and maintain the organized, representational system of psychic life. In a certain sense, the embodied experience of thing-presentations, as a lively kinesis within, comprises traces of incestuous connection. This is why, as so many sexological studies have shown, sexual excitement—what "turns us on"—so often tinkers around the forbidden. The fantasies that fervently arouse are frequently risky or risqué, gamboling or gambling with prohibition. Yet outright violation of the incest taboo connotes the death of the psyche, a madness from which one or both of the participants can rarely return. At its core, any breach of the incest prohibition entails the disorder or disorganization of the "mind"—an experience of dissolution or annihilation that connotes deathfulness and thus intimates death itself as *terminus ad quem*.

In terms of "losing one's mind," it is worth noting the way in which sexual intensification, especially the peaks of orgasmicity, threatens the cogency and coherence—the containment—of the psyche. Orgasm can induce a transient loss of consciousness, a temporary dissipation of "ego organization," and a disintegration of self/other boundariness. This too connotes a certain sort

of deathfulness or death. This is *la petite mort* (cf. Barthes, 1975, 1977). Here one can consider Georges Bataille's brilliant 1957 essay on human erotics, describing how we come from and return to the great continuity of being, living our lives with a sense of discontinuity from others—a discontinuity ruptured in the experience of sexual intensification and orgasm, solo or partnered. One can also consider here the complex Lacanian literature on the notion of *jouissance*, its fundamentally transgressive character, and our refusal of it or resistances to it (cf. Lacan, 1959–1960/1986; 1964/1973, 1966, 1972–1973/1975). Sexuality is inherently ecstatic—*exStasis*—it has the potential to "take us out of ourselves," which is a potential both fearful and blissful.

It must here be briefly noted that the fear of such experiences of sexual intensification and orgasmicity, along with what might appropriately be considered the transpersonal or mystical dimension of orgasmic potential, is regrettably reflected in both the scientific literatures of psychoanalysis and sexology (and in the way in which psychoanalysis has turned away from sexology, and sexology has almost exclusively turned toward biological and behavioral foci).

Since the early days of psychoanalysis, there has been some recognition of the potential of human orgasmicity to induce experiences of transcendence. That is, the potential of orgasmic movements of subtle energy to take the individuals involved into a de-differentiated "space" in which there might be a blissful dissolution of boundaries, as opposed to one that is terrifying. This was intimated in early discussions of "genitality" and "genital love," as well as "orgastic potency" (e.g., Balint, 1948; Rank, 1926; Reich, 1924). However, such phenomena were later treated almost scornfully by some more recent commentators such as Otto Kernberg (1995, 2011), who seems to assume that such experiences or great erotic intensity are necessarily a prelude to violence (cf. Efron, 1985). It is now generally assumed that "too much" implies a certain sort of malevolent madness. Perhaps for this reason, the transpersonal potential of erotic experience has more or less been wholly abrogated within psychoanalytic literature, perhaps especially in its North American contributions (cf.

Goethals, 1976). Notably, by the end of the 20th century, commentators were bewailing the extent to which sexuality had either disappeared from psychoanalytic attention or was retained only nominally (cf. Green, 1995, 1997; McDougall, 1989, 1995). In short, psychoanalytic appreciation of the transcendent or transpersonal potentials of erotic intensification practices—mystical sexuality—has progressed rather little since Wilhelm Reich's 1927 *The Function of the Orgasm* and his subsequent early writings on orgonomy (Reich, 1927/1980, 1960, 1933/1961, 1936/1951), and Sándor Ferenczi's (1938/1989) interesting quasimetaphysical or proto-mystical text, *Thalassa*.

Yet it is from this undercurrent within the psychoanalytic literature that one can understand why healing (as opposed to palliation) is resisted and why sexual intensification or orgasmicity (as opposed to "quick release" sex acts) are so powerfully resisted (Barratt, 2013b). This is why the prospect of both authentic healing and of expansive orgasmicity induce a deep fearfulness within. Consequently, for example, it has been known since Reich's brilliant 1933 text, *Character Analysis*, that most men ejaculate without much, if any, of a full-bodied orgasm. Research conducted by myself and others suggests, complementarily, that most woman only allow themselves a very limited orgasmicity, if they allow themselves any at all (e.g., Barratt, 2005; Komisaruk, Beyer-Flores, & Whipple, 2006).

The psychoanalytic deflection away from the implications of Freud's notion of libidinality as the movement of subtle energies is contextualized by the modern (that is, especially 19th and 20th century) rise of a "scientific" worldview that adhered to Cartesian dualism and thus rebuffed subtle energy teachings. It is remarkable that, for example, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which most regrettably serves as the privileged guidebook for mental health practitioners, fails entirely to differentiate male orgasm from ejaculation. Yet, if the contemporary literature on the energetic implications of sexuality (e.g., Anand, 2000; Rosenberg, 1973) were given greater credibility, it would be well known that orgasm can occur for men without ejaculation, and indeed can occur for both sexes without necessarily requiring any direct stimulation of the

genitals. Consideration of this literature, however, leads into the realm of "spiritual-sexual" experiences that can, under most definitions of mysticism (e.g., Abhayananda, 1996; Happold, 1963), be considered transpersonal or mystical.

Final Notes on Mystical Sexuality

In the English language, there has been for the past three or four decades an escalating spate on publications on "tantric"—spiritual, transpersonal—"mystical" or esoteric sexuality. Much of this can be dismissed as hype—spume on the waves of superficial faddism. However, beneath the allure of fugacious fashion is something profound: namely, a longing for transpersonality and transcendence. That is, a longing for the meaningfulness of lived-experience beyond the imprisonments of our egotism. Tantric and Taoist lineages of spiritual practice (among many other esoteric traditions) teach that human sexuality might be something far more than a matter of an individual's "getting off." Rather, sexual activities become an essentially spiritual practice. What is commonly considered erotic becomes meditational (Barratt, 2006).

Orgasmic movements of subtle energy both might connect the flow of libidinality within the monadic individual to that of the cosmos, and also might conjoin, as if divinely, the flow of libidinality experienced by one individual to the flow experienced by his or her spiritual consort (cf. Barratt, 2004, 2006, 2009). The former—the erotic connectivity that can be experienced by a person with the universe itself—has been discussed under the rubric of "cosmic consciousness" or "oceanic feelings" (cf. Barušs & Mossbridge, 2016; Bucke, 1901/2009; James, 1901-1902; Parsons, 1999; Tart, 1990; Vermorel & Vermorel, 1993), although frequently this literature avoids addressing the inherent sexuality of such experiences. The latter—the erotic connectivity that can be experienced within the individual or between an individual and his or her sexual consort or consorts—offers methods by which the transcendent and the transpersonal dimensions of being-in-the-world may be cultivated.

There is now much valuable and rather diverse literature, in the English language, on these processes of "meditating with the body" (e.g., Barratt,

2004, 2009; Bharati, 1993; Douglas & Slinger, 1979; Ray, 2008); as well as a few introductory texts that I feel comfortable recommending (e.g., Avinasha, 2003; Chia, 1983; Feuerstein, 1998b; Frantzis, 2012; Michaels & Johnson, 2006). From the standpoint of transpersonal psychology, these processes are somewhat different than those that pertain, for example to other modes of psychic experience, perhaps in that the flow of psychic energy is rather more directly and immediately within the awareness of the participants (which is not to imply the reflective or evaluative self-consciousness).

Some of the essential features of this spiritual practice, when done with a partner, should be mentioned. During this spiritual-sexual intercourse, the classic position of "yab-yum" representing the primordial and celestial union of consorts (which does *not* necessarily imply that the sexes of the couple must be male/female, since they could be gay or lesbian) is adopted. What is then cultivated is a continual circulation of subtle energies from the root chakra or genitals of one partner, up and through his or her embodied experience, through his or her eyes into those of the other partner, down through the latter's experience to the genitals, and then into the genitals of the former. This circulation is maintained *orgasmically* for as long as both partners can endure the experience of blissful, cosmic dissolution. There are many other methods accomplishing similar effects, but three features of this particular meditational practice are noteworthy. First, although mutual genital stimulation is often involved, the process can be maintained without intromission and even without direct physical stimulation of the genitals. The secret of the practice is a certain practical wisdom of knowing that orgasmicity is, ultimately, not about genital involvement, but about how one *breathes* throughout the entire being of embodiment (cf. Feuerstein, 1998a; Ramacharaka, 1904; Rosen, 2002). Second, the process is almost invariably accomplished by maintaining steady and very close mutual eye-gazing. As many people know, eye-gazing in this intimate manner very quickly induces an experience of de-differentiation, which is an essential aspect of what is accomplished by these methods (cf. Osho, 2004, 2010). Third, this

practice surely cultivates what must be considered a transpersonal connectivity between the persons involved. It inspires a sense of communion beyond the boundaries of self and other, as well as a connectedness with the mysteries of the cosmos. To engage such powerful meditational practices, as with surrender or submission to intense orgasmic movements of subtle energy, requires that one be unafraid of death and of the incessant deathfulness that is within every moment of aliveness.

In the so-called Western tradition, it has been asserted by so many philosophers—from Marcus Tullius Cicero to Michel de Montaigne and then to contemporaries such as Simon Critchley—that to live fully, one must know death and know how to die. In what is known as the Eastern tradition, this wisdom has also been explored in so many different ways. Tantrics, for example, have long known the spiritual benefits of meditating next to funeral pyres and lovemaking in graveyards. Unavoidably, one's life is, as has been said (perhaps somewhat facetiously), a "necronautical" journey; it is also a trajectory of subtle energies and libidinal vicissitudes. Clearly, to appreciate the transpersonality of life, to apprehend fully the significance of the subtle energies that run within us, through us and perhaps throughout the universe—and indeed to be fully *alive!*—one must confront the inseparable lifefulness of death and the deathfulness of life itself. We cannot shrink back from an awareness of the libidinality of these subtle energies and the principles on which it operates. We surely cannot avoid the erotic character of spiritual enlightenment and the necessity, for all of us, of sexual healing.

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