

Ayurvedic Approach to Spiritual Emergencies  
Appearing as Psychosis: Strengthening the  
Sushumna Nadi

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*“Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness, provided that madness is given  
us by divine gift”<sup>1</sup>*

In 1845, the term psychosis was conceived encompassing all mental disturbances.<sup>2</sup> However, within the last 20 years the word ‘psychosis’ has been creating confusion of what it actually means and what type of psyche umbrella it really covers.<sup>3</sup> Some of the confusion began with the term ‘spiritual emergency’ when it was coined in 1989 by Stanislav Grof M.D. and Christina Grof, founders of the field of transpersonal psychology.<sup>4</sup> The revelation of redefining symptoms of psychosis as being a spiritual experience shed new light on treatment protocols. This Review of Literature will discuss how psychosis appears to look like spiritual emergencies, why it is important to address spiritual emergencies from an Ayurvedic approach, and how to strengthen the Sushumna nadi in order to heal, recover, and ultimately gain wisdom from the divine experience.

What is the definition of psychosis and spiritual emergencies and how do they have parallel similarities? Psychosis has been defined as “any one of several altered states of consciousness, transient or persistent, that prevent integration of sensory or extrasensory information into reality models accepted by the broad consensus of society, and that lead to

maladaptive behaviour and social sanctions.”<sup>5</sup> Stanislav Grof, M.D. and Christina Grof assert that a spiritual emergency is a “non-ordinary state of consciousness” and is a “crises of the evolution of consciousness, or ‘spiritual emergencies’, comparable to the states described by the various mystical traditions of the world.”<sup>6</sup> One can see these two definitions vary in great degree on how they perceive the manifestation of these experiences, however, they both are in concusses that a crisis is being called to attention.

Here is a chart to visually see the parallel similarities and yet differences: <sup>7/ 8</sup>

Spiritual Emergencies	Psychosis
clairvoyance or clairaudience (seeing or hearing aspects of nonphysical reality)	delusions
ecstatic and overwhelming experience of God	hallucinations
out-of-body experiences where conscious awareness separates from the physical body	lack of insight and self-awareness
new revelations birthed from experience	confused and disturbed thoughts

The primary difference between psychosis and spiritual emergency has more to do with the diagnostician’s perception of the experience (and thus the suggested treatment protocol that will be administered) than anything else. Since the Scientific Revolution of the West starting in the sixteenth century, western psychiatry have perceived ‘non-ordinary states of consciousness’ not as a pathway to personal growth and transformation, but rather as a “pathological distortions of mental health,”<sup>9</sup> and thus treating it in this way with psychopharmacology and pharmaceutical intervention. Stanislav Grof M.D. states:<sup>10</sup>

*Spontaneous non-ordinary states of consciousness, (NOSC) that would in the West be seen and treated as psychosis, and treated mostly by suppressive medication. But if we use the observations from the study of non ordinary states, and also from other spiritual traditions, they should really be treated as crises of 1 transformation, or crises of spiritual opening. Something that should really be supported rather than suppressed. If properly understood and properly supported, they are actually conducive to healing and transformation.*

In this approach encouragement and support is sought after to engage the senses rather than repression of the senses. Something to note is not all psychosis is driven by spiritual emergencies and vice versa. With that said, a use of caution should be in place so that psychotic states are not over looked by spiritualizing it and the other way around.<sup>11</sup>

When we look at spiritual emergencies we see that the mind, body, and soul all need to be acknowledged as part of the experience. Thus, It is important to address spiritual emergencies from an Ayurvedic perspective because Ayurveda, being the “knowledge of life,”<sup>12</sup> has a holistic approach to healing all of these three limbs by the “combination of body, sense organs, mind, and soul.”<sup>13</sup> Ayurveda also believes one cannot live without the other, additionally, one cannot be manipulated without affecting the others.

Ayurveda defines spiritual emergency as a “flow out of the sushumna nadi... this results in a complete loss of separation between the physical and astral worlds.”<sup>14</sup> A nadi is a subtle channel that carries life force (prana) and vitality to the functions of consciousness.<sup>15</sup> The yogic texts describe that there are 72,000 nadis in the body allowing us to have full animation of our bodies and mind.<sup>16</sup> The Sushumna nadi holds the most importance because it is the greatest channel of life force “equivalent of the spinal canal”<sup>17</sup> and it is the container which holds the Ida nadi (feminine energy channel) and Pingala nadi (masculine energy channel).

If the Sushumna nadi breaks and cannot hold either it's prana or that of the Ida or Pingala nadi then a spiritual emergency is able to occur. This may manifest through Shamanic crisis, awakening of Kundalini energy, episodes of unitive consciousness, crisis of the psychic opening, past-life experiences, or near death experiences just to name a few.<sup>18</sup> When this happens it is expressed as prana ‘flowing out’ of the Sushumna nadi. A ‘flow out’ of prana results in “hallucinations, paranoia, insanity, and extreme uncontrollable interaction with the psychic environment”<sup>19</sup>. One can see that these symptoms, described in Ayurveda, are comparable to the symptoms seen in the above chart analyzing spiritual emergency and psychosis symptoms.

In addition to a ‘flow out’ of Sushumna nadi we also see an extreme depletion of ojas. Ojas in sanskrit means “vigor” or translated as the necessary energy for the immune system.<sup>20</sup>

In the classical Ayurvedic text, Astanga Hrdaya, ojas is explained as the essential part to living or dying: <sup>21</sup>

*Ojas is the essence (sara) of the dathus ending with sukra (productive); though located in the heart, it pervades all over the body and regulates the working of the whole body; it is greasy, preponderant in aphuta or water of principles (somatmaka), transparent, slight reddish yellow in color; by its loss (destruction, absence) the loss of the body (even of life) is sure to happen and by its presence the body (and life) is sure to survive; from it are brought about the different states (conditions, activities) concerned with (related to, residing in) the body.*

The importance of ojas is so apparent that if the immune system is depreciated then the body is easily accessible to physical, mental and spiritual diseases. Speaking on a physiological level, the central nervous system does have a direct link on the immune system.<sup>22</sup> In the abstract by Dantzer and Wollman describing this correlation, they contend that, “the communication pathways that link the brain to the immune system are normally activated by signals from the immune system, and they serve to regulate immune responses.”<sup>23</sup> Dr Frawley reaffirms, in an Ayurvedic contexts, the avenue between the mental ojas and physical ojas by stating, “a pattern of imbalances on the mental level, with disturbed thoughts and emotions, is usually reflected and reinforced on a physical level.”<sup>24</sup> Here we could say the health of the subhumna nadi is a reflection of the health of the mental, physical, and spiritual ojas.

This is where Ayurveda has a strong hold. By strengthening the Sushumna nadi, we are able to strength our mental, physical, and spiritual ojas. This will allow us to be able to contain and control the pranic flow and ultimately assimilate healing, recovery and wisdom from the divine experience. However, first the most important emphasis is healing the body by building ojas which creates a healthy space for a healthy mind.

All Ayurvedic healing is based on the patient’s doshic prakruti and vikruti. Ayurveda has three doshic categories, Vata, Pitta and Kapha. Each identifies with certain qualities. Vata controls movement in the body (air and ether qualities), Pitta controls metabolism in the body

(mostly fire and some water qualities), and Kapha gives strength and stability to the body (water and earth qualities). An individual contains all three types of doshas at different percentages creating a particular doshic balance. This is what makes each individual unique and thus their treatment plan unique to them. The prakruti is the patient's doshic balance they were born with, referred to as their 'constitution'. The vikruti is a doshic imbalance that manifests symptoms that are not harmonious to the prakruti. When discussing Ayurvedic treatment protocols for spiritual emergencies, the prakruti and vikruti are always part of the foundation for deciding the patient's treatment.

The body has an astounding capacity to continually rejuvenate itself. Its natural intelligence is always moving towards health. However, when the doshas become imbalanced and the sushumna nadi breaks this capacity of self-rejuvenation can become blocked. The Ayurvedic classical text, Astanga Hrdaya, writes, "Insanity is made (toxicity/disorder) of the mind caused by the doshas (vata, etc.) moving in the wrong paths (due to their increase)."<sup>25</sup> Beyond building the Sushumna nadi there are many benefits for rejuvenation therapy. In the classical text, Caraka Samhita, "a person undergoing rejuvenation therapy attains longevity, memory, intellect, freedom from diseases, youth, excellence of lustre, complexion, and voice, excellent potentiality of the body and the sense-organs, vak-siddhi (i.e. what he says comes true), respect and brilliance."<sup>26</sup> Not only do we see strength in rejuvenation, but also vitality and thriving life. Here is an Ayurvedic rejuvenative approach to spiritual emergencies that contains lifestyle, diet, body therapies, yogic practice, and herbs in order to establish and reinforce a durable Sushumna nadi:

\*note: The most important suggestions to strengthen the Sushumna nadi are listed, but not all. In addition, I have included rejuvenation therapies to bring tonifying qualities, however, it is important to note that in the the Caraka Samhita, in order to begin rejuvenation therapies one must go through purification therapies to clear any ama (toxins) from the body.<sup>27</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing on the tonifying therapies not assuming if the client has ama or not. In addition, with the presence of low ojas due to a weakened Sushumna nadi, only tonification is recommended because purification could potentially diminish ojas even more because it's inherent nature to be cleansing and causing to much lightness in the body.

## **Lifestyle**

- It is important that one must cease all yogic and spiritual practices in order to allow the mind to focus on healing and to rest the physical body.<sup>28</sup>
- Having a caretaker initially to manage vitiations of symptoms would greatly be recommended. This way the patient will be unbothered by added stress and may also start seeing his/her own symptomatic patterns through the help of another.<sup>29</sup>
- A commitment from the patient to healing is necessary for any rehabilitation to occur.
- Avoid all stimulation (i.e.: television, internet, fast driving etc).
- Studies have shown spending time in nature promotes mental health.<sup>30</sup>
- Cultivating a sattvic space (purity) for living and eating will support natural healing to occur faster. This may include the color white, have a peaceful energy, and nourishing atmosphere.

## **Diet**

- The taste qualities should focus on sweet, heavy and oily.<sup>31</sup> In the Astanga Hrdaya, it is said that internal oleation is the first approach to take.<sup>32</sup> Such foods include root vegetables, grains, nuts, ghee, sesame oil.
- Everything must be cooked for easy digestion, so the body can use its energy for other healing facets and that nutrition can be easily absorbed.
- Eat whole, fresh, local, and organic foods.<sup>33</sup>
- Eat in a peaceful environment and thank the food that is provided for healing.
- Eat on a regular schedule, 4-5 small meals a day is preferred.

Dr. David Frawley advocates the importance of diet for mental health:<sup>34</sup>

*Most psychological problems reflect our dietary habits, either in what or how we eat. They cause us to eat wrong food, or to eat in a wrong or irregular manner. All imbalances of the mind disturb the digestive system through the nervous system. Correcting diet helps clear out the unconscious habits that sustain our mental unrest.*

\*\* Note that all dietary recommendations will be subjected and balanced to the individual's prakruti and vikruti.

### **Body Therapies**

- Abhyanga massage: can be performed by oneself or given by two Ayurvedic massage practitioners. Use preferably sesame oil due to its heaviness and ability to promote ojas.<sup>35</sup> It's emphasis is on clearing the lymphatic system, increasing circulation, decreasing dryness, and calming the senses. When administering give attention to the face, crown of head, ears and soles of feet. Keep oil on the body for 30mins then soak in bath or rinse off. Do not use any soap to allow some oil to retain on the skin.<sup>36</sup>
- Shirodhara: a stream of oil directed onto the client's third eye activating the pineal gland and calming the nervous system, helping insomnia and mental disturbances.<sup>37</sup> By calming the nervous system, it allows the body's innate healing ability to absolve stress stimulus. Sesame with a combination of rejuvenative tonic herbs (see below) is suggested for the oil stream. This procedure is usually given for 20-45 minutes.<sup>38</sup>
- Svedhana: a fomentation process that will be given with low heat and long duration either under a steam tent or sitting in the sun. The idea is to warm up the body to absorb and digest the oils given internally and externally, and to ignite the fire of digestion, called 'agni'.<sup>39</sup>
- External Bastis: a dough, usually made from Udad flour, formed into a dam around certain energetic vortexes such as chakras around the body or else can be placed on any part of the body that needs healing. Bastis recommended are Uro Basti (4th chakra, heart, strengthens the heart), Svadhishthana Basti(2nd chakra, water, provides fluidic and grounding effects) and Shiro Basti (crown chakra, head, revitalizes sensory functioning).<sup>40</sup>
- Anuvasana Basti: a rectal enema using oils that may or may not have the addition of rejuvenative tonic herbs. See below for suggested rejuvantive tonic herbs. The colon is the home of Vata (movement qualities) and is closely in relation to the Earth element, thus the Anuvasana Basti gives a nourishing and grounding quality to the movement of air qualities in the body. It is ideal to hold this basti in the body for 3-6 hours for maximum benefits, though one should never struggle to retain the basti, instead go with the body's natural responses.<sup>41</sup>

## Yogic Practice

- Although all yogic practices are suggested to be ceased, Yoga Nidra is an exception. It is beneficial because it relaxes the body and allows for the subconscious and conscious mind to activate. This creates an environment for physical and emotional healing. The procedure starts by lying on the floor in savasana, “corpse pose.” In order to have a deeper interaction with the physical body the practitioner begins to mentally scan the body to release any held tension. At the same time, the assimilation of meditation qualities by scanning the body and letting go of tension balances the emotional state and activates self-healing. In addition, the added benefit of Yoga Nidra is that there are no side affects and can never harm the practicing individual.<sup>42</sup>

## Herbs

- Rasayanas (tonics) Herbs to build ojas and nourish all tissues:
  - Ashwaganda (VK-): a nervine sedative and tonic all in one creating a superb herb. It strengthens a depleted nervous system that can show signs of hyperactivity such as emotional instability, agitation, or feeling stressed.<sup>43</sup>
  - Bala (VPK-): promotes strength, ojas, rejuvenation, energy, and intellect. Also pacifies neurological disorders.<sup>44</sup> Suggested usage in massage oil for abhyanga and Bastis.<sup>45</sup>
    - \*\*\* note: banned from the USA for internal use due to ephedrine content.<sup>46</sup>
  - Brahmi (VPK-): reduces mental illness, increases intellectual power, rejuvenative especially for the nervous system, gives strength to the mind, improves memory, learning ability, and concentration, it is a nervine that is adaptive to what the person needs, either a stimulant or sedative, promotes both energy and sleep, directly influences the nature of consciousness. Used to aid recovery from exhaustion, stress and debility, coined as the “brain tonic,” often combined with ghee or milk to enhance its tonification and ability to nourish the nerves, recommended to use with digestive spices so that it is digested well.<sup>47</sup>

- *Shatavari* (VP-,K+): a nervine tonic and increases ojas. It is unctuous and heavy in its nature. Commonly boiled with milk, ghee and digestive spices to increase its tonic properties.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, Sebastian Pole, author of *Ayurvedic Medicine the Principles of Traditional Practice*, expresses the added benefits of rejuvenation by indicating that, “In fact, these (rejuvenation) practices alone will rejuvenate you; they will improve your quality of life, your experience of life, and they may well extend it.”<sup>49</sup>

A person who underwent a spiritual emergency can have feelings of internal shatteredness.<sup>50</sup> That all the pieces of themselves have broken into a million pieces and cannot find its way back together again. This reflects the Sushumna nadi breaking its container as mentioned above. The importance of the Ayurvedic approach of strengthening the Sushumna nadi is to piece these fractured pieces back together. The combination of these rejuvenation therapies allows this to happen and to rebuild the pranic vessel. With all spiritual emergencies in addition to these therapies, Ayurvedic psychology should be recommended while going through the process in order to heal the body, transform the mind, and ultimately retrieve the blessings given through the experience of a spiritual emergency.

On a global aspect, we are seeing more and more political, climate, and economic crisis happening as our population increases and technology rises. Of course, on the contrary with these developments we are also seeing greatness being expanded. However, this fast inclination is causing our Mother Earth to fall into devastating dis-ease. We see this with glaciers melting rapidly, oil spills killing off enormous parts of water ways, nuclear power facilities destroying air quality, deforestation destroying ecosystems etc. and the list keeps growing.<sup>51</sup> The first approach to treatment has been to antidote the symptoms; a temporary relief from suffering in the moment. However, it is time to take an Ayurvedic perspective on healing by looking at the cause and reflecting on our emotional, moralistic and spiritual state of present-day humanity.

Understanding the distinction between psychosis and spiritual emergencies grants wisdom into seeing the bigger evolutionary direction we are heading. Spiritual emergencies are not a new juncture for human beings. Ancient traditions have written and told stories of such events acknowledging the experiences as blessed. Great sages, saints, yogis, prophets, and teachers have been seen even as having psychosis while experiencing non-ordinary states of consciousness.<sup>52</sup>

The trajectory that is presented currently is that we are now finally gaining back the wisdom or rather remembering how to support and offer sanctuary. Providing language around the word 'psychosis' and 'spiritual emergency' opens up new neural pathways to perceive a situation in a new light. So must we with the spiritual emergency the planet is currently experiencing. First, we heal ourselves to heal the planet. This said, the health of humanity is the reflection of Mother Earth's health. Moreover, strengthening her Shushmna nadi can bring pranic divine healing. As we are part of the devastation, we too are part of the healing. It all starts with the individual. Once we learn to love ourselves, we can love and assist the community's crises, and ultimately nurse the planet's and humanity's vitality back to its inherent balance and grandeur.

- <sup>1</sup> Dodds, E. (1951). *The Greeks and the irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8826692>
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 1
- <sup>4</sup> Stanislav Grof, M.D./Christina Grof (1989) *Spiritual Emergency When a Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis* New York:St. Martin's Press
- <sup>5</sup> Nelson J. (1994) *Healing the Split*. State University of New York Press
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 4, pg. 2
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.lynnwoodland.com/about-lynn/lynns-articles/spiritual-emergencies>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Psychosis/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 4, pg. xi
- <sup>10</sup> Redwood D. (1995) *Frontiers of the Mind*, Interview with Stanislav Grof MD. Health World Online
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.* 4, pg. xiii
- <sup>12</sup> Dr. Marc Halpern (2010) *Principles of Ayurvedic Medicine*, Tenth Edition, pg. 2
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.* pg. 3
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.* pg. 210
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.* pg. 206
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.* pg.207
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.* 4, page 13-14
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.* 12, pg 210
- <sup>20</sup> Dr. David Frawley,(2000) *Ayurvedic Healing, A Comprehensive Guide*, Second Edition, pg 48
- <sup>21</sup> Astanga Hrdaya, volume I, pg. 132. verse 36-38
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12910622>
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid.* 20, pg. 315
- <sup>25</sup> Astanga Hrdaya, volume III, pg 46. verse 1
- <sup>26</sup> R.K. Sharma/ Vaidya Bhagwan Dash (reprint 2015) *Caraka Samhita*, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Volume III, pg 8, verse 7-8

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* pg. 12, verse 24-28

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 12, pg. 212

<sup>29</sup> Mary Thompson. Master Teacher at California College of Ayurveda. Lecture on September 13th, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22705180>

<sup>31</sup> Sebastian Pole (2013) *Ayurvedic Medicine, The Principles of Traditional Practices*. Singing Dragon, pg. 106

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* 21, pg. 49 verse 18-20a.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Thompson. Master Teacher at California College of Ayurveda. Lecture on September 14th, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Dr. David Frawley (1997) *Ayurveda and the Mind, the Healing of the Consciousness*. first edition. Lotus Press. pg. 189

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* pg. 202

<sup>36</sup> Sunil V. Joshi M.D. (1997) *Ayurveda and Panchakarma, the Science of Healing and Rejuvenation*, First edition, pg. 278-279

<sup>37</sup> [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22131683](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22131683)

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* 36, pg. 194

<sup>39</sup> Micheal Tierra, C.A.,N.D. (1988) *Planetary Herbology*. Lotus Press, pg. 85

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* 36, pg. 235

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* 36, pg. 240-241

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/health-wellness/2013/12/17/yoga-nidra-gaining-credibility-stress-reducing-technique/QTUhiX40B33I5HvHBzt3qO/story.html>

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* 31, pg. 133

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* 31, pg. 137

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* 31, pg. 138

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* 31, pg. 138

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* 31, pg. 149-150

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.* 31, pg. 271-272

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* 31, pg. 106

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* 33, lecture on February 21st, 2016

<sup>51</sup> <http://emergingearthcommunity.org/defending-mother-earth>

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* 4, pg. 138