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Exploring Taksu & Meditation - Mysterious Power and the Tools to Realize It

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Exploring Taksu & Meditation -

Mysterious Power and the Tools to Realize It

Leonard Swanson - 4/12/11

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Preface

I came to the island of Bali hoping to learn about the local people's spirituality, to witness how they practice faith, and to see if local wisdom could be brought back to America. Here, I became intrigued by the mysterious power of Taksu and the worldwide practice of meditation. For this Independent Study Project, I aim to examine the relationship between meditation and Taksu, and see if the combined wisdoms can be cross-culturally applicable to foreigners in the west.

Balinese Hindus place an important emphasis upon frequent, elaborate ceremonies, but this practice is too place/time/context specific to adapt into American religious norm. Offerings are not part of the American lifestyle, nor are sacrifices a regular American religious practice. Thus, my quest to bring spiritual wisdom back to America would have to work through a cross-cultural medium.

I came across the concept of Taksu, a word without an adequate English translation. Some call it charisma, others call it spiritual power. There is no doubt as to the respect Taksu wields in Balinese culture; dancers with Taksu capture the eyes of the audience, Balians with Taksu heal their patients with mysterious power, speakers with Taksu become fascinating and inspirational. The purpose of this study is to find out exactly what Taksu is, how it works, how it is attained, if it can be translated into other cultural contexts. While Taksu can be applicable to both secular and non-secular circumstances, the focus of this particular study is to examine the existence and practical implications of Taksu in a spiritual setting.

If the focus of this project is upon Taksu, the lens from which it is viewed is through meditation. Meditation has been a widely used spiritual practice because of its

simplicity and immeasurable power. While meditation is not a primary focus in the life of the average Balinese Hindu, it is nevertheless practiced among local Buddhist monks, Hindu priests, and Balian (local healers). For this project, I hope to practice and learn about several types of meditation from the above stated religious traditions. I plan to examine each style of meditations' means, aims, potential, and relationship to the term Taksu.

Religion has shown its face through every culture in humanity. I came to Bali to examine how the mystery of global spirituality expresses itself through the Balinese people; Taksu and Meditation have shown up as its representation. I am tremendously excited to plunge into this culture's religious life and see how growth can develop. I believe we have plenty to learn from each others' wisdoms, and I believe Taksu and meditation are the perfect mediums through which American and Balinese spirituality can connect. The following month will tell exactly how strong that connection can be.

What is Taksu?

An Investigation into the Verifiability of The Spiritual

Analysis of spiritual or religious concepts frequently encounters the category of experiences that defy human logic or reasoning. Empirically, a subjective explanation brings problems; holiness cannot be proven true or false, we would have to trust a person at his or her word. Frustratingly, it would be easy to justify any action if spiritual inspiration were to be philosophically valid. For example, 'I had a pure, divine feeling that God meant me to stab my wife', or 'I cannot explain why, but I had a strong spiritual impulse to steal that candy bar', 'I feel imbued with Taksu today, I deserve the lead position in today's dance performance', or, 'We're going to win the war because God is on our side'. While the given examples may be extreme or mundane, there is no empirical method to test divine influence within a person's decision making.

The inability to objectively define a thing does not negate the possibility of its existence. The concept of love is universally accepted and cannot be measured or weighed in an empirical realm. Most humans have some idea of love, and can closely relate to those who claim to feel it. If asked to define or explain love, people are commonly unsure or uncomfortable about its parameters. Love cannot be empirically measured, but it would be difficult to find a person who claims it does not exist.

Taksu is of a similar nature. We could ask a Balinese audience whether a dancer had Taksu because they already know what to look for. We could ask the audience to measure the presence of Taksu in the dancer's performance, but not how to define what they are looking for. An American audience however, would not have any idea how to

measure the presence of Taksu. Not only would they be confused by the foreign word, but they could not relate it to a previous encounter.

What can be done is an analysis of Taksu and meditation from Balinese spiritual experts. For this study on Taksu and meditation, I have chosen to interview five different spiritual masters from a variety of religious backgrounds to further understand Taksu and how it can be described and practiced. I will meet a Theravadin Buddhist Monk, a Balinese Puppetmaster, a High Hindu Priest, a local Martial Artist, and a Balinese Traditional Healer to examine how Taksu affects their lives and how it can be cultivated. This study may not arrive at a concrete definition, but hopes to provide an analysis into the local masters' expertise, perhaps even importing Taksu to American religious life. From this study, one can recognize Taksu and cultivate it through various methods of meditation.

A Retreat into Emptiness:

Experiences from a Theravadin Buddhist Monastery

Day 1 - Settling in, Meditation Lesson

Upon my arrival at the Brahma Vihara Asama (Brahma Monastery), I was intimidated by meeting a Buddhist monk. After checking into my room, showering, and brushing my teeth, I noticed a schedule posted to the door of my wall:

Jadwal Meditasi Vipassana (Daily Schedule)

3:45 Bel Berbunyi/Wake Up Bell
4:00 Meditasi Jalan/Walking Meditation
5:00 Meditasi Duduk/Sitting Meditation
6:00 Meditasi Jalan/Walking Meditation
7:00 Makan Pagi/Breakfast
8:00 Wawancara/Interview
9:00 Meditasi Duduk/Sitting Meditation
10:00 Meditasi Jalan/Walking Meditation
11:00 Makan Siang/Lunch
12:00 Meditasi Duduk/Sitting Meditation
13:00 Meditasi Jalan/Walking Meditation
14:00 Meditasi Duduk/Sitting Meditation
15:00 Mandi atau berbersih/Showertime
16:00 Meditasi Jalan/Walking Meditation
17:00 Ceramah Dhamma/Dharma Talk or Discussion
18:00 Meditasi Duduk/Sitting Meditation
19:00 Meditasi Jalan/Walking Meditation
20:00 Meditasi Duduk/Sitting Meditation
21:00 Meditasi Jalan/Walking Meditation
22:00 Istirahat Tidur/Take a Rest

Tetap Tenang - Keep The Noble Silence

Jumping off the page was the amount of meditation, the lack of sleep, and the absence of dinner. Quite simply, those who practice here must do so with extreme dedication. I shortly found out that this routine is only kept during specific retreats.

Though I have been invited to keep to the schedule, I would be doing so alone. I felt nervous about the schedule's intensity, but excited for the results it could yield.

Upon settling into the monastery, I took time to seek out the only monk here, Bantei. Having heard him before, I was intimidated to meet him again. Although only 5'4, the wisdom he expounded made a striking impression. Meeting him personally a second time, his smiling eyes, round face, and relaxed expression made him remarkably approachable despite the oft-frustrating language barrier. He had a calm air about him, always smiling with complete sincerity. Kindness shined from his body not through physical light, but through a calm, immeasurable grace. His voice was soft, his speech gentle, his intentions genuine. Some described Taksu as an aura; Bantei definitely wielded it.

After brief introductions, I asked him how meditation is taught here. He proceeded to give a long explanation about the four types of meditation: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. Because he spoke in Bahasa Indonesia without the help of a translator, I understood the basic concepts but not his detailed explanations.

In sitting meditation, it is important to sit up straight with your feet on the ground. You should make sure your head is not tilted up or down, but balanced in the middle. If you notice your posture slouching in such a way, you should correct it promptly. Next, feel your breath from the skin between your nose and upper lip as it enters and exits your lungs. Then feel your stomach rising and falling with the breath. He says the mind may often drift off to thoughts about America, friends, classes, etc, but you should not follow the wandering thoughts. Instead, bring your attention back to the physical sensations of

the body. He gave all of these instructions with the slightest smile on his face, gesturing every motion as he explained them.

Further instructions for sitting meditation involved the more involved Metta Practice, loving kindness. After about 5 or 10 minutes of settling down, you should focus your attention on wishing happiness to people. He said you should wish yourself happiness, then wish your surrounding friends happiness, then your parents, then more people, then all beings. He said this meditation is not a practice about helping our self, but helping all beings. After wishing all beings happiness, start over again and continue repetitions for a full hour.

For walking meditation, hold your hands behind your back, in front of your stomach, or folded across your chest. He said to be conscious of every movement of each step, mindful of your foot coming off the ground, lifting it, moving it forward, extending it, lowering it, and setting it down. You would then repeat it with the other foot, lifting it, moving it forward, extending it, lowering it, and setting it down. Again, if concentration were to go elsewhere, you would bring it back to your feet. Keep every action in mind with each step, walking at a very slow pace. After about ten meters, turn around slowly and carefully, and continue back in the direction you started. The walking meditation also continues for an hour.

During the night, you are to practice sleeping meditation. Bantei recommended sleeping on your side, noticing your breath as it rises and falls and rises. When you hear the wake up bell at 3:45am, open your eyes, sit up, feel your feet against the ground, and walk slowly and mindfully to the bathroom to wash up. He even mentioned grasping the door handle, turning it, releasing it, shutting the door, and turning the key. He carefully

described all of these seemingly mundane actions because every movement in the life of a monk is important, no time can be put to waste in absent-mindedness.

The last kind of meditation he taught was standing meditation. This meditation was not listed in the schedule, so I never experienced its effects firsthand. To exemplify, he stood about a foot away from a wall and chose a specific point. He said to look at the point, bringing the focus in smaller and smaller. Bantei said this meditation is particularly beneficial for pin pointed concentration instead of loving kindness or general awareness.

Day 2 - Experiences

Since there is no way to describe the experiential effects of meditation objectively, a subjective analysis will have to suffice. I have decided to follow the schedule as closely as possible, substituting would-be lecture times for writing, substituting Teacher-Student interview times for a short nap. (While there will be an interview with the Biksu (Bantai) on Wednesday evening, an hour is nevertheless open from the daily schedule) To adapt to the abnormal sleeping schedule, I elected to skip the last period of walking meditation and the first period of the morning. From here on out, I will do my best to follow the schedule as it describes barring any emergency health concerns.

One of the greatest difficulties thus far has been constancy of meditation practice. Since there is a meditation for every kind of movement, sitting, standing, walking, and lying down, I have made a personal goal to be mindful at all times for this stay. Even the most mundane activities now deserve my complete and full attention. To help with this endeavor, I have begun to act very slowly. There is no rush here, as there is nothing I

need to do; all of my meals are cooked for me, and I have no other chores or responsibilities. Nevertheless, past habits of rushing and laziness emerge despite there being nothing at stake. I feel the most rushed and least mindful when there are people in my presence, especially Bantei. Perhaps I am concerned of appearing strange, corny, or making a positive impression to those around me.

Careful attention brings about the awareness of moments when one is not being mindful. For example, I can carefully pick up a bar of soap and rub it on my skin, but there are infinite moments in between these actions that the mind hurriedly deems as unimportant: carrying the soap from the ledge to my body, the weight of the soap in my hand, the motions of the muscles in my arms and back as I move my body, etc. Mindfulness dictates there never being a dull moment in the mind of a monk, as there is always something to pay attention to.

Another frustration has been loneliness; I practice here alone in silence. While there may be 50 or so tourists and a dozen staff members to host them, none of them meditate with me. While one monk lives here, he practices separately in his own compound of the monastery. Because my schedule is self-designed, I am perfectly free to leave the compound, get to know the tourists or workers, and even take a nap. Due to my dictatorial inner critic, my desire for an 'authentic' meditation retreat, or my internal drive for meditation, I have mainly kept to myself in hopes of keeping noble silence and a disciplined schedule.

The meditation itself is filled with emotional ups and downs, though they have gradually been smoothing out. Every so often I will get bored, restless, or frustrated, and will curl over in a sigh of disappointment. Harsh thoughts about my effort, my decision

to stay here, or general resistance reign while I sit slumped in a depressing stupor. Eventually, I gather enough resolve to sit up straight again. While meditation seems ludicrously difficult to maintain, all it requires is simple, relaxed breathing. It is amazing, actually, the struggles that accompany an hour of focused breath; conventional logic would suggest that a task so simple would be a 'walk in the park'. Not so, as I am figuring out first hand.

I am also debating whether or not to eat dinner. There is no dinner on the schedule, as Theravadin monks do not eat after noon. I have been offered a nightly meal and received a surprised reaction upon its polite refusal, so I am unsure as to the norm for extended guests. For this project, I want to do my best in examining the Theravadin style of meditation, and am wondering about its effectiveness if I choose to eat dinner when they usually do not. I never ended up eating dinner at night, as my appetite was quelled due to the inactivity of the monkish lifestyle.

Day 3 - Experienced Benefits

As I mentioned the difficulties that meditation can bring, its benefits are boundless. I feel much calmer; my perception seems to have space around its edges. While thoughts come and go, their pace has slowed; I am more likely to be attentive to each one. The contents of thought are the same (planning ISP, wondering what my friends are up to, judging the performance of my meditation, wondering how much time is left, etc), their momentum is more soothing, much easier. It is as if two people dine at a restaurant, the meditator's thoughts come from a calm, charismatic waiter while the others' waiter is stressed, distracted, and hurried. Meditation may not give you better

food, but it will give your meal a more soothing ambiance, a more pleasant dining experience.

I smile more as well. Everyday experiences of walking or typing seem pleasant and carefree. My laughs are different too- I am more willing to laugh at my own thoughts than I was before, and they use more of my body. I laugh deeper at silly thoughts and more often at mundane ones. My smile takes up my whole face, I can feel more muscles activate in my cheeks and ear muscles. Mindfulness practice may have yielded new awareness to facial areas, or I engage smiling muscles I do not usually use. At one point, I became so overwhelmed with intense joy that I texted my friends "I'M TRIPPING BALLS OF HAPPINESS!!!". I had never felt such a pure sensation of joy outside the setting of a meditation retreat, further proving the effectiveness of meditation in creating joy.

I also occasionally get surges of energy through my body during seated meditation. They feel like pleasant electric shocks through my organs and muscles. Previous meditation retreats have yielded intense spasms and shaking, an experience that a separate teacher has told me is not uncommon. Bantei too agrees that everyone will at some point experience bodily shaking with the practice of meditation, the mind's shaking manifests in the physical realm. He said the moving energy represents the mind and body becoming one, a positive sign in Buddhism. I have not been diagnosed with epilepsy because I have also not sought a doctor's opinion on the matter. These spasms are never painful but merely somewhat unusual. As the experiences are rather pleasant, I have so far elected not to seek professional help apart other than from spiritual teachers.

Day 4 - Alternate States of mind

It is my third full day of meditation, and I am tripping out. I am not seeing or hearing unusual things, but rather I am seeing, hearing, and feeling in high definition. This 'trippy' feeling comes from ordinary life being innately beautiful, simple, and precious. The pre-categorization of objects and experiences has faded and things are left as they are, completely calm and serene. There is no way to convey this perception without several days of firsthand meditation experience.

All previous meditation retreats I have attended outlaw writing because it gives thoughts free reign. Meditation is the practice of bringing thoughts back to the present, and writing is an outlet for pesky absent-mindedness to flourish. Writing also strengthens the idea that thought and experiences string together into a permanent being, a self. Buddhism teaches that there is no self ("All the elements of being are non-self; When one by wisdom realizes (this), he heeds not sorrow; this is the path of purity" Dhammapada XX:7); experiences are what they are, there is no experiencer. In this case, writing is necessary for the academic integrity of my ISP, and I will have to suffer its hindrances.

Day 5 - Interview

My interview with the Biksu began with the help of three English-speaking Indonesian students. I asked the students what Taksu was and they answered with a deep breath, smiled, and said Taksu is tricky to explain or even talk about. After the initial shock of the question, they ultimately came to the conclusion that it was one's inner heart and that it must be felt, not thought about.

As Bantei entered the room, I turned the Taksu question towards him, expecting a similar response to what he had said in our previous encounter two weeks ago. He had denoted Taksu as spiritual power, and said it was not of great use to try and seek it.

Like breathing, he had said, one cannot just inhale, one must exhale as well. Inhaling is like gathering Taksu, but one must also let it go. From Bantei's standpoint, Taksu is a positive gentle feeling, but not ultimately useful in Buddhist practice.

This time when asked about Taksu, Bantei again recognized it as spiritual power but described it as an aura. The Indonesian students agreed, saying that one with Taksu stood out from ordinary people. Bantei said meditation continually strengthens one's aura, gradually creating a better person. Such a practitioner shows happiness everyday, and will have no enemies because of his or her exuded generosity. People will be overwhelmed by the kindness exuded in the meditator's aura, and they will want to be kind in return. Others' souls would be drawn to the aura. (While there is technically no soul in Buddhism due to the concept of an-atman, I will assume the mention of a soul in this context could be due to the prevalent mix of Hinduism and Buddhism in Bali, but Bantei could have been referring to one's karma, or perhaps there was a mistranslation). A continued practice of meditation increases one's Taksu, but Taksu is not the aim of Buddhist meditation. Taksu is seen as a peripheral benefit of meditation, not its exclusive purpose.

As I quickly learned in the interview with Bantei, Nirvana is aggravatingly slippery to talk about, Bantei said the goal of meditation is emptiness, and Nirvana is nothing but emptiness. He said nirvana is not a place, it is not on earth, it is not a situation, but nor does it ever change. Well, I asked, if the earth is nothing but change, and Nirvana is never changing, how do the two relate to each other? He said Nirvana is not of this world, there is neither birth nor death in nirvana, and it cannot be explained or rationally conceived. He says that nothing on the earth is actually real because it all will

pass away. Just as this computer and these words appear before my eyes, this computer will not last, the words will be long forgotten, and my eyes will shrivel upon my death. No physical things are real in Buddhist philosophy. Instead, the only lasting thing in this world is neither a thing, nor is it of this world; there is only emptiness, devoid of any characteristic or conception. Nirvana is what is not, but nor is it nothing. One who has attained nirvana lives in emptiness and will do so eternally because the enlightened one has no impermanent physical manifestation.

In meditation, one lets go of attachments to the impermanent world. Thoughts commonly come in the form of self interest; 'when will I eat again?', 'I wish that person would stop talking', or 'I wish that pretty girl would notice me'. These thoughts all contain an impermanent 'I', an impermanent self. As long as there is such an attachment to the self, there will be attachment to the impermanent world; one cannot attain nirvana through attachments. Meditation is noticing attachments and returning to the task at hand.

One cannot attain nirvana by a strict regiment of meditation alone. Ananda, one of the Buddha's attendants, spent all day in concentration but could not attain Nirvana. One day while meditating on his bed, he fell to his side in drowsiness. Just before his head hit the pillow, Ananda became instantaneously enlightened. Thus, there is no hard and fast prescription to Nirvana despite the essential practice of meditation.

Bantei has been a monk for almost 5 years, a novice compared to his Biksu colleagues. Formerly married with 3 children, Bantei took care of his wife and children financially and emotionally before renouncing the world and ordaining. Biksus are only allowed possess 8 objects in the Theravadin Buddhist tradition: an outer robe, an inner

robe, a needle, thread, a belt, a water filter, a razor to shave his head, and a begging bowl. They do not eat any food after their noontime meal. The monastery is the property of the community, where Bantei lives his simply and peacefully. He said while there are many monasteries, there are very few Biksus.

Biksus do not have any money, nor does they need any. Bantei's job is to practice meditation, study the dharma (The Buddha's teachings), and teach the community. Like the symbiotic relationship of the bird and the buffalo, the citizens take care of Bantei's material needs, while the Biksus teach the wisdom of happiness back to the people. The hardest part about his job is to live in happiness, saying it is an important responsibility to stay disciplined in the practice of meditation to achieve happiness and peace. He says while ordinary people work for money, Biksus work for happiness. He likes the simple life, so he chose to live as a renunciate. Bantei certainly seemed happy and peaceful whenever I saw him, giving me a genuine smile whenever our eyes met. It was clear he was doing his job well.

Taksu as Spiritually Inspired Performance:

Interview with the Puppermaster Itu Wayan Jelantik Oka

Itu Wayan Jelantik Oka is a Dalang, a puppeteer. Shadow puppetry is a noble profession in Balinese culture. Long ago, the Balinese relied on story telling to express religious, educational, or political views. Although used primarily for entertainment today, Wayang still plays a major part in Balinese cultural heritage. Because shadow puppetry occurs when evil spirits roam at night, the Dalang (puppeteer) must wield spiritual power to protect himself and others. One performance even involves evil witches to come forth and challenge the Dalang's divine prowess. The Dalang must be ready and potent in spiritual presence, meaning he must regularly meditate and cultivate Taksu. Dalangs, therefore, make for a wonderful Taksu expert.

While we did not discuss the profession of a Dalang specifically, Wayan Jelantik made sure to emphasize that his perspective of Taksu came from the arts; Taksu makes the performance come alive. If someone were to act as a giant, the audience would perceive a giant, not an actor trying to portray a giant. When playing Arjuna from the Mahabharata, an actor's Taksu takes over and the medium of the actor is removed. In the context of Balinese art, Taksu is the divine unity of the performer and the performance into one fluidity.

Like many of the other interviewees, Itu Wayan Jelantik Oka said that Taksu cannot be approached by theory or words, only from personal experience. Taksu is too difficult to explain because it is intangible, so instead he talked about the conditions and situations where he felt that Taksu had been present. According to him, Taksu is a magical feeling that everyone has; no one lives without it.

In the divine sense, Taksu comes from the Goddess Sang Hyang Semara, the goddess of love. To clarify, Wayan Jelantik does not refer to the love felt between a man and a woman, but the deeper love of the soul: the wish for others to be happy and peaceful. Taksu is not born from emotional attachment, but from a genuine wish for well-being. The presence of Taksu spreads when the love of Sang Hyang Semara is present.

Most Balinese people pray to Sang Hyang Semara at a Taksu shrine for good luck and holy presence. Pak Jabalah was a traditional muscle and bone healer I encountered in the village of Kutuh, a perfect example of someone who prays for the Sang Hyang Semara for help. Like most Balinese people, Pak Jabalah's family has a Gedong Taksu in their temple complex, praying to the Taksu god before healing each patient. My Balinese teacher Wayan Ariati echoed the idea of Taksu prayer, saying that common examples include students praying for help on an exam, prospective workers praying for a charismatic job interview, etc. Pak Jabalah says does not feel any different when he prays to the Taksu god, nor does he become entranced in a mystical state of mind. Being a Balian, Pak Jabalah prays at Gedong Taksu more often than a typical Balinese Hindu, praying at this particular shrine for about 15 minutes before healing each patient.

When asked how Taksu prayer differs from prayer to God, Pak Jabalah replied that the Taksu God Sang Hyang Semara is God's vice president. While God is ultimately at the head of divine functioning, he has 'assistant gods' that have more specific influences in the world around us. The Gods are like a government, my friend I Wayan Rebayava explained, there are many branches and specialties, but they are also all one

governing body, one God. God is at the head of all of the gods, but Taksu is in charge of helping people with their specific requests.

According to Wayan Jelantik the Dalang puppeteer, those who already wield the spiritual power of Taksu can cultivate it themselves without the use of prayer through a shrine. The Dalang says prayer is only necessary if the person does not already recognize his or her innate Taksu. Wayan Jelantik did not criticize those who prayed for Taksu, but did imply that relying on one's innate Taksu was more directly effective. Instead of making offerings or going to a Taksu shrine, the performer's personal relationship to his or her Taksu is all that is necessary.

If the performer recognizes his or her own Taksu, this person can engage in Taksu cultivation. Echoing Bantei, Wayan Jelantik says meditation is one of the central practices that increases one's Taksu aura. In Wayan Jelantik Oka's description of meditation was eerily similar to that of Bantei the Biksu's. The Dalang said he practices meditation five times a day, but the quantification is problematic. He concentrates on all activities, be it showering, eating, talking, being interviewed, etc. Such constancy mirrors that of Bantei the Biksu, making all the activities of life worthy of complete mindful attention.

I discouragingly found only a few Balinese people who meditate, convinced that I researched an imported practice from the western new-age movement, and that meditation is not Balinese. In Wayan Jelantik Oka and his son-in-law Pidada Sindu renewed my hope. Many people practice meditation on this island, many of whom are too humble to talk about it; these people would rather let their meditation speak for itself

and not boast of their ability or inability. Apart from humility, many just do not know how to meditate, or even try.

Wayan Jelantik described a four step process of Taksu-related meditation: First, smoothen the breath. The inhalations and exhalations should be relaxed and balanced. One should then align the mind with what is present, letting go of thoughts of self and other. After unity, empty the mind of thoughts, emotions and passions, free of hindrances. Once settled, focus the mind on the bile, hidden behind the liver. The power of the bile then grows, and Taksu is freed to flourish outwards.

Spiritual transformation is not easy; it necessarily involves hindrances. The taste of bile is bitter; To cultivate Taksu, one must transform the bitter taste into that of sweetness and deliciousness. Without difficulty, Taksu would not wield as much awe and wonder. Playing Kadeng for example, (A Balinese drum), one's knees and hands hurt while the musician learns appropriate technique and style. While the pain is unpleasant, the obstacle is necessary for the musical skill to develop and flourish. Taksu and meditation are the same way; the hindrances encountered vary, as are the corresponding techniques.

Taksu does not depend on any one specific religion. Everyone innately possesses Taksu and can cultivate it through the practice of respective religions religion. A Christian who loves Jesus would exude Taksu through the power of devotion. Similarly, a meditating Buddhist such as Bantei the Biksu exudes Taksu through diligent concentration. Thus, Taksu does not depend on a specific religion, but depends on purity of character and wholehearted intention of the spiritual practitioner.

While Taksu is innate in all beings, it only helps those cultivate spirituality continuously. If a person behaves recklessly, Taksu can disintegrate. Excessive pride such as, 'I'm doing a great job in my meditation and research, I clearly have Taksu and don't need to meditate any more' is not centered in selfless intention, so the Taksu diminishes from within. The person must profess confidence and grace for Taksu to be present, and must also be ethically holy and pure.

Pak Wayan Jelantik says Taksu is located in the bile. Abstract spiritual concepts do not usually have exact biological locations, but bile is almost too specific to understand. Bile works as a chemical detergent of the stomach, aiding the digestion of fats and the process of waste productsⁱ. My father, a cell biology professor at the University of Michigan, was quite puzzled at the suggestion of bile providing any sort of function beyond that of human digestion. Nevertheless, Pak Wayan Jelantik confidently claimed that Taksu grows in the bile and expands to person's immediate surroundings. The special feeling affects others by touching their bile too. The affected bile in others inspires a new sensation of Taksu. The new Taksu emerges as an aura, which can then spread again to other people. Like an exciting idea, Taksu spreads across the biles of all it encounters.

Wayan Jelantik said a sign of Taksu's presence is goosebumps. Witnessing a transcendent artistic performance brings goosebumps to the viewer's skin; Taksu spreading from the performer to the audience, the audience receiving it with a physical reaction. While goosebumps may be a sign of Taksu's presence, the absence of goosebumps does not necessarily imply the absence of Taksu. Surely we have all felt

goosebumps before, whether it be through music, a sporting event, a lover's words, or excitement for an upcoming event. Therefore, we have all experienced Taksu firsthand.

Thus far, I have met three people on this journey who have possessed what I currently understand to be a Taksu aura. These people brought with them a supernatural presence, a calming air of happiness of peace. The first one was Bantei the Biksu, the second being the Dalang, Itu Wayan Jelantik Oka, and the third was Pidada Sindu, the Dalang's son in law. I was confused when Pidada Sindu introduced me to the Dalang; I was expecting an ordinary person to take me to the Taksu priest, but this man wielded the exact aura I was looking for! Sure enough, when he took us to his father-in-law's complex, he answered questions about meditation and Taksu as confidently as any master I had encountered. Both the Dalang and his son-in-law answered as Taksu experts, to which I had no problem with. I could instinctively tell they wielded the Taksu aura I had been looking for in this project.

When asked about the relation between Taksu and Moksa (Hindu Liberation), our interviewees replied there is no relation whatsoever. Taksu is a pleasant feeling in the present worldly state, whereas Moksa is otherworldly liberation; the two cannot be conceptually bridged. Someone may recognize spiritual potency through a Taksu aura, but Moksa is so far beyond the realm of this world that the two have no relation.

Meditation and Moksa however, have much in common. The practice of meditation is the first step towards the realization of Moksa. While Moksa cannot be realized until death, the cultivation of meditation can lead towards Moksa, the soul's return to God. If Taksu is the spirit's aura in this worldly life, Moksa is the spirits true essence, only expressed upon one's death.

Undoubtedly, the Dalang Wayan Jelantik and his son in law Pidada Sindu expounded great wisdom from their experiences with Taksu and Meditation. Taksu clearly plays a major role in Balinese performance art, making divine presence an essential role in Balinese culture. American rock stars, dancers, and talk show hosts could all benefit by cultivating Taksu, and I'm sure that many already do, albeit indirectly. Ideally, these entertainers could warm to the idea of enriching their spirituality if it resulted in a deeper connection with their fans. According to Wayan Jelantik, all they need to do is meditate!

High Hindu Holiness:

Taksu & Meditation in the life of Pedanda Ahba

Itu Pedanda Gede Ketut Ahba is a High Balinese priest in Geriya Jungutan Bungaya, Karangasem Bali. He leads religious ceremonies and gives spiritual advice to those who seek his wisdom. Pedanda Ahba ordained in 2004, feeling a calling to live up to his priestly caste. His brother and sister already held full time jobs, so it was Pedanda Ahba's responsibility to keep his caste's tradition alive. While pemangkus (Lay Priests) can lead minor ceremonies and rituals, a Pedanda (High Priest) must be present at the most important religious holidays. Pedanda Ahba must wield religious authority to fulfill his role in Balinese society, making him an expert in the spiritual potency of Taksu and meditation.

Becoming a Pedanda requires elaborate rituals and preparation. For a six-month period leading up to his ordainment ceremony, Pedanda Ahba was restricted to a fruit-only diet. The next six months, he was only allowed to eat root vegetables. Even today, he is not allowed to eat salt, restraining him from the desire of taste. He must learn how to taste the food's subtle flavors without the addition of sodium. He is currently not allowed to eat four-legged animals such as pig, cow, or dogs, but is permitted to eat chicken and fish. The eating of four legged animals is a Taksu inhibitor, a detriment to his holy profession.

The dietary restrictions, fasting, and ethical rules are major distinctions that separate the Hindu religion from Buddhism. The Pedanda did not know the Buddhist priestly guidelines, but explained that his rules are Hindu specific. Apart from Bantei the Biksu, the Pedanda had a full head of white hair, lived with his family, took charge of

several local ceremonies, and taught various styles of meditation to his followers. The Pedanda drew from the Hindu epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, whereas Bantei voiced the original sayings of the Buddha.

Pedanda Ahba described a set of ceremonies that allows Taksu to enter the physical body, the Melukat. They can occur once a month for three consecutive months, scheduled at the full moon, the new moon, or the kaja-kliwon alignment of the 5- and 7-day weeks of the Balinese Calendar. Ceremonies are an essential part of Balinese Hinduism, so a Taksu ceremony about the Goddess Syang Hyang Semara comes to no surprise. Unfortunately for this project, Pedanda Ahba did not know of any Melukat ceremonies during my stay in Karangasem, and I could not personally observe the ceremony first hand.

One's participation in the Melukat ceremonies does not guarantee Taksu for life. Agreeing with Wayan Jelantik the Dalang, scattered thoughts, poor focus, and impure acts of selfishness can all decrease one's Taksu. Every interviewee thus far has cited negative impacts of absent-mindedness in relation to either Taksu or meditation. A wandering 'monkey-mind' (ie. one of scattered thoughts) is not only practically harmful, but spiritually detrimental.

Thus, Pedanda Ahba emphasizes skill in concentration. The simplest and most common meditation being focus on the breath, noticing the air as it enters and exits the body. Echoing Bantei the Bisku and Wayan Jelantik the Dalang, the cultivation of meditation must be continuous or its effects will diminish. The styles of meditation taught by the experts have been remarkably similar; all three of them recommended a breathing practice to bring about Taksu.

A more obscure meditation was staring at the tip of one's nose. The mind may wander, but the practitioner should return the attention to the tip of the nose until the time had finished. I personally found this practice painful, convinced I was harming my eyes in the process. The Pedanda assured no permanent damage would occur if practiced in moderation, but I never got comfortable crossing my eyes for an extended period of time. The Pedanda again suggested the amount of time should feel correspond to one's circumstances, gradually increasing the meditation's length if appropriate.

For his personal daily Taksu practice, Pedanda Ahba chants a mantra called Ngurwa Sewana for an hour every morning. The Ngurwa Sewana mantra allows Taksu to enter and inspire him throughout the day. He did not demonstrate this mantra, but did make a hand motion implying that the mantra involves ringing a small bell, a common device used for prayer among Pedandas. The rest of his activities may involve the leading and participation of various ceremonies, and the resulting Taksu follows him and inspires his prayer.

Pedanda Ahba enthusiastically claimed that Taksu brings a qualitatively different feeling and confidence. When Taksu is present he feels no fear, only calm; he makes no mistakes or errors, speaks fluidly. That very morning, the Pedanda was supposed to give an inspiring speech to his followers. Though he had not prepared his talk, the Taksu gave him confidence and charisma to lead the people.

Pedanda Ahba agrees with Wayan Jelantik in describing Taksu's relation to the performing arts. Taksu can inspire beautiful improvisation that captures the audience, eliminating the need to write down a story or plan. When Taksu is not present, the performer can feel nervous, and the audience would notice immediately, neither party

would be satisfied. There is a common cultural saying for this type of dissatisfaction, "Taksu has not yet arrived". Again, the practice of Taksu not only improves the actor's performance, but it enhances the audiences' enjoyment as well.

Another Taksu-related meditation invokes Sang Hyang Aswin, the male twin god. Pedanda Ahba prescribes invoking this God while looking at his portrait for two hours a day. As it is unreasonable for a layperson to immediately incorporate two hours of meditation in his or her daily schedule, Pedanda Ahba suggests starting with a shorter amount of daily practice. One can start with 15 minutes a day, gradually working up to the full 2 hours.

Pedanda Ahba started meditating when he was about 20 years old, saying the drive to practice meditation is a gift from God. Every person meditates differently, explaining there is no universally sanctified style of meditation. The amount and variation should correspond to a person's lifestyle.

Similar to the other interviewees in this field study, the Pedanda explained that meditation practice increases one's level of Taksu. Differing from Wayan Jelantik and Pak Jabalah however, Pedanda Ahba seemed confident in saying that meditation was actually necessary to cultivate Tasku, implying no other methods could work.

Not only is meditation necessary for Taksu, but belief is also essential; one must first believe in Taksu to cultivate it. According to Pedanda Ahba, A Christian who solely believes in Jesus does not wield Taksu because he or she would not believe in it.¹ While

¹ According to a given Christian's belief system, one could interpret Taksu as the Holy Spirit and part of the Christian Holy Trinity, complicating the Pedanda's religious unilateral nature of Taksu. However, the aim of this study is focused on understanding the Balinese perception of Taksu, not that of Christian theology. Such analysis, though potentially fascinating, must be left for another study.

one may believe in God and all His holy power, Taksu and its aura is an entirely different matter.

The necessity of belief in Taksu is the most conflicting finding of this study thus far, previous interviewees have reported opposite opinions. Both Bantei the Biksu and Wayan Jelantik the Dalang agreed that meditation is enough to cultivate Taksu, saying that belief can be useful but not essential. Judging from the subjective, I personally noticed a powerful Taksu aura coming from Bantei the Buddhist Biksu despite there not being the concept of Taksu in the Buddhist religion. However, because Pedanda Ahba is the most qualified Taksu expert encountered thus far, his opinion takes precedence until an overwhelming majority of interviewees were to contradict him at the study's conclusion.

So far, there seems to be an overwhelming consensus on breathing meditation and its positive correlation with Taksu, but the necessity of belief makes adaptability to America somewhat more difficult. It is clear that meditation-based religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism involve implicit Taksu cultivation, but it remains unclear whether prayer-based religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam can access the same sort of aura.² Instead of potentially providing a 'Taksu incentive' for people to more deeply practice spirituality in their preferred manner, non-Balinese Hindus would be forced to adapt their belief system to include Taksu auras if they wanted to access its potential. Taksu would be more accessible to Americans if it were cross-tradition inclusive, but less so if it required a foreign belief system.

² Admittedly, the categorization of 'prayer-based' and 'meditation-based' religions is far too broad to accurately portray a follower's respective practices. An attempt is being made to draw widespread sociological implications that necessarily lend themselves to excessively inclusive stereotypes.

Seruling Dewata:

Mixing Meditation with Power

For a more accessible study, I wanted to find a group of lay people that practiced meditation. While it is fascinating to learn about the habits, practices, and wisdoms that come from the most devoted holy men, it is equally as important to learn how meditation is practiced in the lives of everyday Balinese people. Meditation can be extremely transformative to those who give up their lives in search of transcendent spirituality, but the majority of people cannot practically abandon their lives for a spiritual quest. Many people have families to take care of, jobs to work, and mouths to feed; an all-day meditation practice is not conducive to the everyday lifestyle.

Thus, I met Ngurah Bagus, one of the board members of meditation organization called Seruling Dewata. This group mixes meditative and yogic practices with martial arts, aiming to create a balance between physical and mental stability. Almost four centuries old, this group has ancient ties with the Chinese martial arts style of Shaolin. Seruling Dewata boasts 73 styles of contemplative practices, though only 9 are commonly used today.

To describe the group's background, Pak Ngurah Bagus told the story of an ancient master by the name of Bodhidharma. Bodhidharma is a popular mythical figure in many schools of Buddhism, particularly the Mahayana branch commonly found in China, Korea, and Japan. While the historical evidence supporting this man's existence is questionable at best, he is nonetheless quite renowned for his unflappable dedication and mysterious character.

Common myths describe Bodhidharma as a hermit who brought Buddhist teachings from India to China, but the Seruling Dewata claims he crossed the Indian Ocean to the land we now call Bali. Here, he met a master by the name of Ki Golpo who had survived a great battle of Sunya Nala Tuara between warriors of the sun and the moon. Ki Golpo represented the side of the moon, and was the only survivor from this epic clash. Upon meeting Bodhidharma, Ki Golpo had recognized that Bodhidharma was proficient in the teachings of the Indian charkas, making him a prime student to teach the exquisite school of martial arts.

Equipped with the teachings from Ki Golpo, Bodhidharma continued his journey to China. There, he encountered a priest who was attacked by a robber. The priest did not fight back, saying that true loving kindness implies turning the other cheek in peace. Bodhidharma saw faults in both the priest and the robber, saying loving kindness without power is weakness, but power without loving kindness is evil. The combination and balance of loving kindness and power is what Seruling Dewata teaches to this day.

Seruling Dewata strikes the balance of loving kindness and power with the method of contemplative martial arts. Ngurah Bagus explained that physical activity reduces the prana or energy in the body, whereas meditation invites the prana back into the body. While physical exercise may make a person powerful and physically strong, it can break a body down if too rigorously approached. Extensive meditation can yield potent spiritual results, but not everyone has the capability and practical lifestyle to live as a spiritual recluse.

Pak Ngurah Bagus includes a variety of spiritual practices in his morning routine before he goes to work. He begins with a sitting meditation in a specific bodily posture:

his legs were crossed as normal, but his thumb and middle finger touched with both hands, the back of his left hand resting on his knee, the right hand pointed upwards in front of his heart. While the physical posture may have been different, Pak Ngurah Bagus brought his attention to his breath like each of the other interviewees of this study.

He would follow the sitting meditation with a chanting practice, invoking a different God for each day of the week. Sunday, for example, is the day that Ishwara is to be invoked. To exemplify, he sang a simple melody that repeated itself, and saying it is done to soften the soul. He did not specify how many times he repeats the chant, but even one demonstration of a repetition brought about a calmer atmosphere to the interview. Ngurah Bagus agrees with Pedanda Ahba in the effectiveness of chanting practice by invoking the holy deities. While Ngurah Bagus did not explicitly relate his chanting to Taksu, he nevertheless cited its spiritual utility.

After chanting he begins his Asanas, postures from the Tempak Suci style of marital arts. This particular practice involves slow, precise physical actions of the body, a mindfulness practice reminiscent of Bantei the Biksu. The other styles in Seruling Dewata also involve contemplative movements, but since Ngurah Bagus was only an expert in Tapak Suci, he did not delve into the variations between the other 73 styles. He carefully demonstrated his postures, going through the forms in a well-practiced, methodical manner. The goal, he said, is to be able to hold a posture for a long time, increasing endurance with physical and mental strength.

Pak Ngurah Bagus finishes his morning routine with a chakra-based meditation to gather the energy lost from physical exercise, saying the body is home to thousands of chakras, or energy centers. If one can master the seven most important ones, all of the

body's chakras fall under the practitioner's control. He said our daily activities close and shrink the chakras, but a specific practice called Nadi opens up the pathways for spiritual energy to flow more freely. Pak Ngurah Bagus demonstrated Nadi practice by going through a specific order of hand motions or mudras that are used to clean the chakras, relating the practice to opening up a dam to a tunnel of spiritual energy. Nadi practice appeared quite popular in Seruling Dewata because my advisor mirrored the very same hand motions; he had only joined the group recently, but demonstrated the Nadi technique quite beautifully. After the chakras are adequately cleaned, the meditator is supposed to visualize a given chakra, transferring the energy from the visualization to one's own physical body.

When enough energy flows through the chakras, the meditator may move on to Kundalini practice. This esoteric meditation involves moving the energy slowly up the chakras along the base of one's spine. Ngurah Bagus did not delve into the specifics of Kundalini practice, but said when done improperly could lead to disease, sickness, and suffering. Thus, proper training is needed to engage in Kundalini practice before proper execution. The practitioner must possess exquisite skill in concentration and must be completely pure when choosing to master the Kundalini. Pak Ngurah did not exactly describe the benefits for those who were to successfully complete the practice of Kundalini, but he did mention the practice was related to Moksa, or the Hindu concept of divine liberation.

When the topic of Moksa was broached, Ngurah Bagus described the five layers of the soul. Fundamentally he described, Atman (the soul) and Brahman (the divine) are not separate, coinciding with an essential Hindu concept of Tat Tvam Asi - that thou art

(Lecture Notes, Vrinda Miller). When one realizes the unity of Atman and Brahman, that person attains Moksa, Hindu Liberation. To clarify, Ngurah Bagus made an analogy to a balloon: the air inside of the balloon is atman, the air outside of the balloon is Brahman, and the balloon represents the five layers of the soul. A person attains Moksa or liberation when he or she understands that the air inside and outside of the balloon is the same. Thus the balloon or the five layers of the soul must be fully understood before the realization can take place.

The first of the five layers is food, the physical make up of the human body. Ngurah Bagus says one's food intake affects the body in a threefold manner: on a physical, nutritional level; on a subtler energetic level; and on a personal characteristic level. Ngurah Bagus said the best way to approach this material layer of the soul is vegetarianism, saying meat makes thoughts harder to control, and turns one's personality sour.

The second layer of the soul is energy, brought under control by clear concentration of the mind. The third is a person's thoughts, the fourth one is wisdom, and the fifth one is happiness. Cultivation of one layer subtly affects the progress made in the higher levels, as they all intimately relate to one another. The practice of eating a healthy diet for example, would increase one's level of energy, giving the person enough power to more adequately control one's thoughts in meditation. Mastering of the beginning levels yields progress in the latter ones; when one has the energy to quiet one's thoughts, that person would gain wisdom freed from the scattered nature of the mind. Being wise would only be useful if a person were to master the last and final level, happiness. After all Ngurah Bagus said, what use is wisdom if one is not happy? Once one has mastered

the fifth layer, that person has attained living Moksa, liberation achieved while still in the human body.

According to Ngurah Bagus, one who has attained living Moksa has a free, advanced perception of reality. He told a story of a person witnessing a snake capture and consume a frog. Initially, a person may feel sorrow for the frog and feel anger towards the snake, but one who has attained a higher level of awareness can see that the snake is hungry, and equally deserving of empathy. One who has attained Moksa understands the scene as a representation of the way things are, feeling no grief for the snake or the frog, accepting that birth and death is a natural part of life. Thus, one who has attained Moksa may witness the same events as a normal person, but the perception of said events is qualitatively different; the liberated being feels no suffering.

While Pak Ngurah Bagus is not a self-proclaimed expert on Taksu, he nevertheless represents expertise on the practice of meditation. Since the findings of this project thus far have yielded an intimate relationship between Taksu and meditation, I find his opinion on the matter of Taksu to be quite relevant for this study. He prefaced his explanation by saying that his responses are merely his opinion, but being the meditation expert that he is, I find his opinions to be quite relevant and authoritative.

Unsurprisingly, Pak Ngurah Bagus's thoughts about Taksu were similar to those of the other experts I have encountered. He said that a regular practice of meditation would lead to Gods to enter into one's physical body, infusing the person with inner beauty and charm. Taksu does not depend on intelligence, even a dim-witted person can

wield Taksu if his or her being is pure enough. According to Pak Ngurah Bagus, more desperate people choose to buy Taksu from local Balians, or Balinese traditional healers³.

Interestingly, Pak Ngurah claims that a physical place can have Taksu. To explain, he says people claim that the Island of Bali has Taksu, or a mysterious charm. Many people thought this charm depended on the island's natural beauty. He remarked that globalization has led to Bali's natural degradation, so Lombok is now more naturally beautiful and environmentally healthy. Nevertheless, Pak Ngurah claims that despite the decline of Bali's environment, Bali still wields a mysterious charm that attracts visitors from all over the world. I suppose that my mere arrival to the island of Bali supports his hypothesis, as I was intrigued by the mysterious religious practices that the Balinese people wielded. If not for Bali's supposed Taksu, perhaps I would not have decided to come to this Island to study at all.

One caveat to his Taksu authority is problematically subjected to my personal observation; he did not wield the charismatic, invisible Taksu aura that I had noticed in my four other interviewees. Again, there is no objective measure for the presence of Taksu, only, "I know it when I see it". There is no telling sign or physical mark of Taksu, so subjective judgment will have to suffice. I would hope that conducting this Taksu study for the last few weeks makes my opinion somewhat valid, though it would be inappropriate to declare myself a Taksu authority in an academic realm. Whether my opinion carries weight or not, it is my personal observation that Ngurah Bagus did not wield Taksu during our encounter.

³ An extensive analysis of Taksu Balians can be found in the next chapter

If my observation in Ngurah Bagus' lack of Taksu Aura were valid, it could complicate the previously established hypothesis of meditation creating Taksu. Ngurah Bagus practices regular meditation, but did not necessarily exude the indescribable, unmistakable Taksu aura. Perhaps his daily profession distracts him from being able to constantly cultivate awareness throughout the day. Maybe Seruling Dewata's emphasis on the physical body detracts from the mental focus needed for Taksu practice. Perhaps Ngurah Bagus simply has not refined himself enough yet; he has only been practicing for eight years, whereas the other interviewees have been meditating for decades.

Regardless, it seems that not every expert exudes the mysterious Taksu. Americans who wish to access the charismatic Taksu aura must be diligent and pure in their practice; otherwise it may not show. Nevertheless, the recommendation of meditation is reinforced by the voice of Ngurah Bagus. If a lay American wanted to incorporate spirituality into his or her workout schedule, that person could bring attentiveness to the physical motions of the body. According to the expert interviewees, the practice of meditation is universal to all cultures and religions, but the wielding of a Taksu aura seems to require a special dedication beyond that of ordinary people.

The Healing Power of Taksu:

Interview Reflections from a Traditional Balinese Healer

On Friday, November 25, I met a Balinese traditional healer, or Balian named I Wayan Yendra. There are a wide range of specialized Balian, ranging from skin, bone, muscle, and black magic curses, but the man I was about to meet was a Taksu specialist. Balian get their abilities from a variety of sources including ancient lontars (traditional palm leaf manuscripts), knowledge from previous generations, personal intuition, and directions whispered by mysterious spirits. The Balian I had previously met in the village of Kutuh was one who specialized in bone and muscle and served more as a chiropractor than spiritual shaman. Some fellow classmates and I also met a skin Balian; this man received his healing power from a stone that magically bounced along the river, mysteriously reappearing at his home. Because of the vast variety of Balian, the variability in their relationship to Taksu differs widely as well.

During the interview, Wayan Yendra explained his spiritual practice, his theories, fascinating stories in his path to becoming a Balian. He was quite an interesting fellow, though he appeared normal and nonchalant. He gave answers that were clear and to-the-point, did not undersell or exaggerate his spiritual abilities, and seemed completely comfortable telling personal stories to a curious foreigner. He undoubtedly possessed the Taksu aura that I recognized in previous interviewees.⁴

I Wayan Yendra's grandfather was also spiritual master, influencing his grandson, the Balian-to-be. Wayan had been practicing meditation, mantras, and fasting since he was 15 and continues up to this day. Raised in Java, Wayan sought and learned from

⁴ For subjective disclaimer, go to page ____

teachers in both Java and Bali who helped Wayan develop his spiritual power and character. Years of practice led him to master his teachers' fields, he became quite accomplished in the realm of the religious.

While he was still a young man, Wayan Yendra would go off to meditate submersed in a nearby flowing river. He sunk deep into the water where it came up to his neck, taking nightly refuge this way at around 11pm. Suddenly, a light came from the heavens and entered into his head, shocking the young Wayan. Upon consulting his teacher, he learned that the light was holy energy entering his body.

His teacher had recognized the young man's holy potential, but Wayan Yendra had not yet realized it for himself. His masters' teachings began to fall into place until one day, when Wayan suddenly realized that all schools of spirituality teach the same thing: one must realize the innate holiness of one's own self. He said that the essence of religious teachings is to understand your own nature, the realization of the self brings about holy consequences. Wayan refers to this moment as the biggest turning point in his spiritual career, the moment when he realized he had a special ability to heal people.

While Wayan Yendra knew that he had Taksu, he did not initially want to become a Balian healer. He had already been successful in the academic realm, receiving an engineering degree from a Javanese university. In an effort to ignore his Taksu, Wayan tried to run several businesses with his university degree. All of them resulted in failure, and the despondent Wayan came to his shrine and wept for help. He promised God that he would become a Balian if his financial needs were met. Sure enough, his uncle offered to help Wayan start a mechanic business with space to conduct healing duties behind the storefront in the family compound. While it could be argued that the uncle

helped Wayan and not God himself, Wayan Yendra's circumstances undoubtedly turned for the better after his desperate prayer.

Receiving a low-interest loan from another friend, the mechanic business grew to where Wayan could pass off the management duties to his coworkers. Wayan was able to become a pemangku (lay priest) in addition to being a traditional healer, living out the holy life while financially supported by the mechanic business. Wayan's prayers were answered, now owning a home in Bali more prosperous than his family's compound in Java. Spirituality, Wayan says, does not depend on money, abundance will come to those who practice for the sake of goodness.

When Wayan finally gave in to becoming a Balian, people started showing up for healings from all over the island. Sometimes friends would recommend him by word of mouth, other times they were told to come to him in a dream. In either case, people were satisfied with Wayan's healings to where they would come back repeatedly. Wayan would sometimes even teach his patients how to heal themselves. A further influx of patients occurred when Wayan was interviewed on the radio about his spiritual prowess; Wayan Yendra knew he had to pass on the teachings, and did so in a series of books he wrote about the Kanda Empat, the four Balinese guardian spirits. While he does not have any children, he hopes his books will pass on the ancient knowledge to those who seek it.

Taksu, Wayan says, is essentially you. It is something that all humans are born with, and it emerges from diligent spiritual practice. It can come to anyone who is honest and forthright in his or her efforts to realize it. He says that Taksu infuses people with different powers depending on their circumstances, it inspires Wayan with the ability to heal. When Taksu is in his body, Wayan says he feels a different vibration filled with

spiritual intelligence or intuition. Taksu not only helps him recognize the ailments of his many patients, but informs him with the knowledge of how to heal them.

A fellow student of mine had been studying Balian for her Independent Study Project, relaying the experience of seeing a Balian heal his patients with the power of his touch. She said his hands felt strong and compassionate, and that he instinctively felt where blockages were located in the patient's body. He would pinpoint certain pressure points and pressed, often times putting the patient through considerable pain. She said he could instinctively know where the ailments were located with the spiritual intuition brought forth from his Taksu.

Wayan engages in the spiritual practices of mantras, fasting, and meditation. He continually repeats mantras throughout the day, chanting a purification ritual when he bathes, a sustenance mantra when he eats, a journey mantra for when he walks, and others for different situations. Similar to the Biku's practice of regular mindfulness, Wayan stresses the importance of constancy in mantra practice. While Pedanda Ahba and Ngurah Bagus also engage in mantra practice, they do not do so throughout the day like the Balian Wayan Yendra.

The second practice of his is fasting. Just as Wayan chants a variety of mantras, he goes through different lengths and styles of fasts depending on his schedule. He may do a 12 hour fast every Monday and Thursday, or adjust his fasts according to different auspicious days of the Balinese calendar. Sometimes he eats nothing at all during these fasts, other times he only eats white foods such as rice and mineral water⁵. He says the purpose of fasting is to control passions and desires; it helps him fight off bad karma in

⁵ The Indonesian for mineral water is *air putih*, literally meaning 'white water'

order to better control his mind and behavior. Similar to previous interviewees, the importance of concentration, discipline, and purity of soul are important contributors to the cultivation of Taksu.

The third practice of Wayan is one particularly relevant to this study, meditation. Interestingly, Wayan claimed that any sort of meditation helps the cultivation of Taksu. While the traditional specifics of meditation posture and mental activity may vary, Taksu can be cultivated by any or all of them. He did, however mention the essence of meditation is focus upon the breath. Otherwise I speculate, the mind is free to wander at will and the sanctity of the practice is lost. While many styles of meditation may be applicable in the increasing of one's Taksu, concentration must be present if one is to call a practice meditative.

Interestingly, he did not outline specific behaviors that lead to the diminishing of one's Taksu. Instead, he simply said that violating holy rules is problematic, leaving the interpretation up to the practitioner. When I asked what the most common Taksu inhibitors were, Wayan replied bigheadedness and greed. He says that Balian often get proud of their spiritual prowess, letting their egotistical nature get the best of them. Other Balian seek to make a profit from their Taksu, overemphasizing the donations and efforts required to heal their patients and exploiting them for resources. I was glad to hear that Pak Wayan never accepts money for his work as a healer; it seems that he is taking care of his Taksu by avoiding major ethical traps.

To illustrate his point, Wayan Yendra told an eerie story of a man who mysteriously fell ill as a result of his excessive pride and greed. A man named Celuk in Gianyar was initially quite adept in the practice of traditional healing, receiving blessings

and praise from his early teachers. He became famous for his spiritual fortitude at a young age, causing him to boast egotistically. Celuk began to charge prices for specific ailments, taking the credit and finances for himself. Suddenly, he became deathly ill and passed away due to unspecified causes. Thus, Balian have to maintain a level of sanctity to retain their Taksu, even their lives can be at stake.

While Balian have the benefit of being filled with spiritual capabilities, their holy position comes with great responsibility. It is especially important that Wayan takes care of his Taksu, as it is necessary to wield his spiritual aura to heal his patients. Pak Wayan says the hardest part of his work is accepting all the patients that come to seek his help. Oftentimes they come late at night when Wayan is worn out from daily priestly activities, but a Balian must everyone who shows up at his doorstep. While a normal doctor gets paid and can refuse patients if inconvenienced, Wayan Yendra must uphold his responsibility to heal everybody free of charge. Wayan receives joy in healing those in need, but admits that his job comes with great hardship.

Certainly, Balian wield no official authority in America, as their techniques would come under severe scrutiny from the empirically based western healthcare system. Wayan has no medical training of any sort, nor does he issue any antibiotics or over-the-counter remedies one typically finds in the west. The American health care system involves health insurance, liability claims, and medical licensing to ensure an ethical transaction of money and health care. No such documentation is required of a Balian or his patients, as the local citizens trust the sanctity of their traditional healers.

While Balian will probably never practice traditional healing in America on a broad scale, the principles of cultivating Taksu through the practice of meditation remains

completely applicable. Wayan Yendra agrees with the rest of the interviewees in saying that meditation leads to the mystical Taksu aura. He engages in a chanting practice similar to that of Pedanda Ahba the High Priest and Ngurah Bagus the Martial Artist, also fasting on auspicious days like the Pedanda. He agrees with Wayan Jelantik the Dalang in saying that any sort of diligent spiritual practice leads to the cultivation of Taksu, contradicting Pedanda Ahba's earlier claim that one must first believe in Taksu to reap its benefits. Unlike any of the other interviewees however, Wayan Yendra the Balian infuses his Taksu to others by the power of healing. While performer Taksu may interact with the audience through the spreading of Taksu Bile, the Balian Taksu is transferred to patients through physical touch. Wayan Yendra possessed the Taksu aura I had noticed in three of the other four interviewees, making him an unquestionable expert in all Taksu-related knowledge. I am certainly lucky to have met these fascinating characters, as all of them have provided fantastically relevant data for this study on Taksu and Meditation.

An Analysis of Emptiness and its Relation to Meditation

The term emptiness has arisen repeatedly in the philosophical analysis of meditation. Bantei the Biksu practices meditation to access the emptiness of Nirvana; the Dalang must empty to where the audience only perceives the character, not the actor; Ngurah Bagus must be empty to transcend the layers of the soul and attain Moksa; a Balian must empty himself so the divine can enter his body and cure illnesses. The word seems to be applicable across religious traditions of Bali, it would be safe to assume they refer to the same philosophical concept (or non-concept, as we are about to unfold its slippery nature). Nagarjuna, a second century Indian Buddhist, writes a treatise on the truth of emptiness and its relation to the world-ensconced form. Though none of the interviewees have specifically cited his work, Nagarjuna has undoubtedly played a primary role in emptiness' philosophical evolution, making him a relevant authority.

Somehow, Nagarjuna manages to write about that which cannot be explained. While the "highest" truth of emptiness cannot be conceived, Nagarjuna uses extraordinary wordplay to portray it anyway. He uses words that point at the limitations of language so the concept of emptiness can break apart one's attachment to form. Nagarjuna skillfully uses form to untangle form through the concept of emptiness by explaining form, emptiness, and dependent origination.

Nagarjuna outlines two truths: a world-ensconced truth and a highest truth, more commonly referred to as form and emptiness. Nagarjuna says, "The teaching by the Buddhas of the dharma has recourse to two truths: The world-ensconced truth and the truth which is the highest sense" (8, An Analysis of the Holy Truths). Nagarjuna does not say there is one truth, he says there are two. He makes a distinction between the truth

that is world-ensconced (form), and the truth of the highest sense (emptiness); form is form, and emptiness is emptiness. While Nagarjuna recognizes that there is a world-ensconced truth, he describes its limits by saying there is a truth outside of worldly expression. Already, he puts himself in a pickle by describing emptiness, something that he claims is indescribable.

If emptiness could only be taught through emptiness, it would have no relevance to form. Why even talk about something that cannot be understood? Mysteriously, Nagarjuna chooses to teach the ineffable in the world of form. He has no choice but to explain the highest truth through the world-ensconced truth because we live in the world of distinctions, "The highest sense is not taught apart from practical behavior, and without having understood the highest sense one cannot understand nirvana" (10). Nagarjuna does not say that the highest sense is true and the world-ensconced sense is false. He says the highest sense and the world-ensconced sense are both true, and the two truths cannot be taught separately. To teach emptiness apart from form would imply that emptiness exists independently of form, but separating the two would only create more form. Thus, emptiness and form cannot be separate truths; emptiness must also be form.

Understanding reality as form alone, Nagarjuna claims, is also a mistake. Nagarjuna says, "If you recognize the real existence on account of the self-existence of things, you perceive that there are uncaused and unconditioned things. You deny 'what is to be produced,' cause, the producer, the instrument of production, and the producing action, and the origination, destruction, and 'fruit'" (16, 17). When one recognizes form to be self-existent, one necessarily disregards the causes and conditions which bring that form into existence. A pen, for example, cannot be a pen for all eternity. To recognize a

pen as a permanent, self-existing thing would be to disregard the manufacturer, the materials from which the pen were made, the elements which helped create the materials from which the pen was made, and so on ad infinitum. One also disregards the pen in relation to other forms; a pen cannot exist without the one who perceives it. There cannot be an object that exists in a vacuum because it depends on causes, conditions, and perception. Therefore, a pen cannot only be a pen, and form cannot only be form.

Since form's origination depends on infinite other forms, Nagarjuna refers to form's interdependent origination as emptiness. Nagarjuna explains, "The 'originating dependently' we call 'emptiness'; This apprehension, i.e., taking into account [all other things], is the understanding of the middle way. Since there is no dharma whatever originating independently, no dharma whatever exists which is not empty" (18,19). Nagarjuna argues that understanding the middle way is seeing the world as an infinite flow of interdependent causes and conditions. For example, this paper, these fingers, and these thoughts all depend on respective causes and conditions, but each set of causes and conditions goes back infinitely. If dependent origination has no beginning, there can be no way to distinguish one form's origination from another's. Since every form originates dependently, there can be no distinctions made between forms because they all come from the same stream of interdependent origination, emptiness. While they appear as distinct forms in this very moment, there can be no distinction with respect to their dependent origination. While form is form, form is also emptiness.

Since form's very nature is also emptiness, there can be no form that does not express emptiness. Nagarjuna could have babbled like a baby and he would have expressed emptiness just as perfectly as he did in his Analysis of the Holy Truths. This

version, however, is much more helpful because it breaks apart misconceptions of the Buddha's dharma. Nagarjuna's skillful use of logic and understanding is indeed a marvel to behold; he loosens conceptual boundaries to this very day.

Relating to the practical nature of the Independent Study, meditation is the practice of emptiness through form. Attention is placed upon the breath as a representation of emptiness through the world of the finite. The breath is a wonderful example of finite things, making it a great meditation tool: it is always with us, serving as a reminder of emptiness's constant presence through all forms. The mind may naturally wander and attach to seemingly important things such as checking email, calling a friend, or watching sports, but chasing finite forms will not lead to satisfaction; according to Nagarjuna, form is also emptiness, so the pleasure from checking email, calling friends, and watching sports will come and go like ever other form, we will be left with the same desires all over again. The practical activities of life are not necessarily harmful so long as one does not get attached to the outcome of form's fleeting satisfaction.

Thus, attention is brought back the representation of the infinite, the breath. In meditation, one lets go of the consequences of form and honors the infinite nature of all things, the stress that would accompany such forms fades away. The constant practice of meditation leads to the release of attachments, and the soul is gradually met with ease and well-being. An average American does not have to sit cross-legged all day to make this happen, one simply has to pay attention to how the infinite emptiness appears in everyday life. At this moment, emptiness shows up as the words on this page, read them wholeheartedly; when finished, go about your daily activities with the understanding that

every form represents the vast emptiness of the world. Meditation is simply the practice of paying attention!

Closing Remarks

Empirically, there is no way to test the existence of Taksu. There is no way to objectively measure it, as Taksu does not delve in the realm of the physical universe. The inability of Taksu to be conceptualized in a theoretical sense makes it fall squarely in the realm of the spiritual and religious. Taksu cannot be tested but when it is present, there is no doubt as to its existence. It cannot be quantified, but only qualified. It fills the person with confidence, charisma, and swagger. Taksu can be used to fulfill desires, but doing so in an unskillful fashion leads to Taksu's disappearance. It can be quite pleasurable, its presence is warm but mysteriously powerful.

With proper instruction and training, one could wield Taksu in a number of different ways. A Balian can heal people with his powerful Taksu, a puppetmaster can take over an audience with unquestionable charisma, and an average person can wield spiritual charm to ensure loving friendships. The experts have differed in how they apply Taksu to their given lives, but they all agree it is cultivated by diligent spiritual practice, only coming to those who are dedicated.

This study has described several types of meditation, the simplest and most widely recommended being focus upon the breath in a relaxed, seated posture. According to these experts, honest constant practice of such will lead to the mysterious charismatic aura of Balinese Taksu. I personally encourage all those who are interested to take a few minutes from their daily schedule to sit upright and breathe carefully. The pleasure may not be immediate, but trusting in the process and sinking into emptiness will lead to unfathomable results of peace and well-being. While we may not be able to

bring beautiful Balinese religious ceremonies to American culture, we can certainly practice meditation and inspire our loved ones with the mysterious aura of Taksu.

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