



ST. HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

by

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Almost twenty years ago — long before the story of the 12th century nun St. Hildegard of Bingen became well known outside her homeland — a Kashmiri yogi and philosopher named Gopi Krishna put her name on a very important list. The list included a number of extraordinary individuals who he believed had reached higher consciousness — an enlightened state attained only by the rarest of saints and mystics from spiritual traditions around the world.

It was Gopi Krishna's contention that the information we could glean from the life story of someone like Hildegard was critically important — perhaps even more important now than at any other time in history. In order to understand exactly why he believed St. Hildegard's life was so significant, however, it's necessary to look in a little more detail at his philosophy and the teachings of yoga in general.

Along with visionaries such as Teilhard de Chardin and Richard Maurice Bucke, Gopi Krishna believed that human consciousness was evolving and that we had reached a critical juncture in this evolution — a time in which many ordinary, every day people would begin to awaken to this evolutionary process within themselves. As this awakening occurred, Gopi Krishna maintained, these individuals would begin to experience varying degrees of spiritual transformation; some might even attain the degree of illumination that marked the lives of the great saints and mystics like St. Hildegard.

Ideally, this ongoing transformation is a slow one, with the changes occurring gradually and virtually imperceptibly over a long period of time. However, due to a number of factors, including the general speed and intensity of our lives today, this process of spiritual transformation is occurring extremely rapidly for a number of people. When this happens, it can cause anything from mild consternation to a fairly cataclysmic upheaval in the life of the person experiencing it.

Gopi Krishna knew this based on his own personal experience. In 1937, after spending three hours in intensive yoga meditation every day for seventeen years, he experienced a spiritual awakening so abrupt that it set his life on end for a number of years. Determined to help others avoid similar crises, he spent the rest of his life researching mystical experience and urging the scientific and medical communities to launch serious scientific studies on the subject.

Because he was from India and practiced yoga, he naturally presented his case to the Western community using this philosophy's terms and symbols. This did not mean he thought that yoga or the experiences of the yogi were in any way superior. On the contrary: he believed that the profound mystical experiences described by great saints and mystics — whether they called these experiences samadhi, nirvana, enlightenment, or mystical union — were essentially the same.

In yogic terms, such experiences are brought about by what is often called the awakening of kundalini. Although the word kundalini begs adequate translation, it is sometimes defined as an evolutionary energy/consciousness force. Kundalini is also known by a variety of other names, one of which is *shakti*. In yoga, Shakti (with a capital S) is seen as the divine feminine principle and the dynamic, creative force of the cosmos. As such she is the counterpart of Shiva, the divine, masculine, static cosmic principle.

In one version of the Hindu creation story it is said that when Shakti and Shiva unite, the universe, with all its myriad, multidimensional forms, bursts into existence. This macrocosmic dance is replayed in the microcosm of the individual where shakti, or kundalini, in its dormant state is symbolized as a sleeping serpent coiled three-and-a-half times around the base of the spine. When this dormant force is properly awakened, it moves upwards along the spine and travels through the energy centers known as the *chakras*. Depending on many different factors, this process can bring about various degrees of mystical experience. It is said that when kundalini pierces the seventh chakra — the crown chakra often described as a thousand-petaled lotus where Shiva resides — Shakti and Shiva reunite, bringing about the divine realization of oneness that is the goal of yoga.¹

Kundalini is believed not only to have this crucial role in mystical experience, but also to be related to other phenomena associated with consciousness, including the awakening of the paranormal abilities² — for example the ability to prophesy — and divinely inspired creativity and genius.

In order to put these esoteric Eastern ideas into a conceptual framework that Western science could more readily study, Gopi Krishna formed what he called the kundalini hypothesis. The first part of this hypothesis can be paraphrased by saying simply that the force/energy known as kundalini in yoga is responsible for such phenomena as mystical experience, psychic awakening, and inspired creativity and genius.³

Although much of Gopi Krishna's energy was directed towards promoting scientific research based on the experiences of people who were undergoing this transformative process today, he also suggested that a tremendous amount of insight could be gleaned from scholarly research into the lives of the great mystics and creative geniuses of the past: If, he argued, kundalini was really responsible for such phenomena as mystical experience and inspired creativity, we should be able to look at the lives of mystics and creative geniuses and find signs of kundalini awakening — or at least kundalini activity — as it was described in the ancient yogic tradition.

To this end, Gopi Krishna provided a list of the characteristics of kundalini awakening. (Interestingly enough, these traits correspond almost identically with what Richard Maurice Bucke called the characteristics of Cosmic Consciousness in his book of the same name.) Central to this awakening itself, he explained, is a profound mystical experience that includes an inexpressible sensation of divine love, bliss, or awe; an unfathomable vision of light, fire, or flames, and an overwhelming, all-encompassing awareness of the divine oneness of all things. Depending on a number of factors, the intensity — or profundity — can vary. It can also occur once or many times in an individual's life, and it can be a transitory or an on-going feature of his or her existence. The rare yogi who reaches perennial higher consciousness is said in some yogic traditions to live in a state known as *sahaja-samadhi*. In *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga*, Georg Feuerstein describes this level of samadhi as being "a state of permanent enlightenment or 'liberation while being alive'."

Arising out of the mystical experience itself comes a transformation in the mystic's consciousness and, consequently, in the way he or she perceives and responds to the world. The most significant of these changes is an actual transformation in mental acuity or capacity that — again depending on a number of factors — might range from paranormal abilities or creative inspiration to the ability to bring new knowledge to the world, or even ultimately, to receive divine revelation. Thus, just as there are degrees in the mystical experience itself, the way the transformation manifests in different individuals occurs along a continuum that ranges from the development of a creative gift or paranormal ability to becoming a saint or, in the rarest cases, one of the great spiritual masters.

1 Kundalini is often assumed in the West to be associated only with kundalini yoga. In fact, the entire system of hatha yoga — the type of yoga most frequently practiced in the West — was developed as a means of awakening kundalini. Beyond this, its universality is recognized in many sources. For instance the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, the primary text on hatha yoga, says "As Ananta, Lord of Serpents, supports this whole Universe with its mountains and forests, so Kundalini is the main support of all the yoga practices."

2 Called *siddhis* in yoga, *iddhis* in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and *charisms* in the Christian tradition, these phenomena are mentioned quite matter of factly in the mystical branch of virtually every spiritual tradition. Although they are generally viewed as a very natural part of the process of spiritual transformation, it is said that focusing attention on them or, worse, becoming enamored with them, can greatly hinder ones progress along the spiritual path.

3 A second part of the hypothesis states that, in an aberrant form of awakening, kundalini can also be responsible for, or related to, some types of mental illness — or what appears to be mental illness. Although this subject is far beyond the scope of this paper, more information can be found in books listed in the bibliography including *The Fiery Muse* and *A Farther Shore*.)

Other traits of the person who has tasted some degree of true mystical experience include an unshakable belief in the validity of the experience itself and in the reality of a divine cosmic force; the loss of fear of death and the certainty of the immortality of the soul; the development of both a powerful charisma and a highly moral, ethical nature that is often expressed in a passion for social justice and a deep concern for the suffering of humanity.⁴

In few places in history do we find anyone who embodies these characteristics more clearly than Hildegard of Bingen — not only because her degree of illumination was so great but also because she was both a true creative genius and a mystic blessed with divine revelation.

Born in 1098 to a noble family who lived near the Rhine river in what is now Germany, Hildegard's mystical experiences began at a very early age. In her wonderful book *Sister of Wisdom: Saint Hildegard's Theology of the Divine*, Barbara Newman quotes a letter Hildegard wrote in her seventy-seventh year to Guibert of Gembloux — a monk who became her secretary in the last years of her life. In it she describes her early perception of the mystic light:

From my early childhood . . . I have always seen this vision in my soul, even to the present time, when I am more than seventy years old. In this vision my soul, as God would have it, rises up high into the vault of heaven and into the changing sky and spreads itself out among different peoples, although they are far away from me in distant lands and places . . .

The light I see thus is not spatial, but it is far, far brighter than a cloud that carries the sun. I can measure neither height, nor length, nor breadth in it; and I call it 'the reflection of the living Light.' And as the sun, the moon, and the stars appear in water, so writings, sermons, virtues, and certain human actions take form for me and gleam within it . . . Moreover, I can no more recognize the form of this light than I can gaze directly on the sphere of the sun. Sometimes — but not often — I see within this light another light, which I call 'the living light.' And I cannot describe when and how I see it, but while I see it all sorrow and anguish leave me, so that then I feel like a simple girl instead of an old woman.

The references to very similar experiences of light are legion in the texts on yoga. For example, an old Indian text known as *Rasarvana* makes reference to a light that illuminates the universe like fire, lightning, or the sun and brings with it:

Perfect beatitude, unalloyed, absolute, the essence whereof is luminous, undifferentiated, from which all troubles fall away . . .

Countless references such as this also exist in the writings of enlightened yogis. One, a 14th century yogini, Lalleswari (often also known as Lalla or Lal Ded), says in one of her verses:

In the dark recesses of my soul I seized upon Him and held him fast, Then I diffused the inner light, (and within, without, all was Light.)

In yet another verse Lalla refers to both the experience of pervasive light and to the sense of soaring into the sky that Hildegard alluded to:

*I turned to Him heart and soul
And heard the ringing of the Bell of Truth.
There in dharana,⁵ fixed in thought,
I soared the Sky and the Region of Light.”*

That Hildegard's mystical experiences contained not only the classic visions of light but also radiated the divine love and the oneness of all things referred to by the yogis is seen repeatedly in her writings. For example, one of the central figures in her visions was Caritas who is, in fact, a personification of Divine Love. In one of Hildegard's visions of her, Caritas reveals how this Divine Love unifies all creation:

⁴ Depending on a number of factors, some or all of these personal characteristics might be evident before any one distinct mystical experience occurs and, indeed, the conscious striving to develop a highly ethical, moral nature is the concern of the first two branches of the eightfold path of yoga.

⁵ The state of focused concentration that is the sixth limb of the eight-fold path of yoga.



The Human Universals

I am the supreme and fiery force who kindled every living spark . . . As I circled the whirling sphere with my upper wings (that is, with wisdom), rightly I ordained it. And I am the fiery life of the essence of God: I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And with the airy wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life. For the air is alive in the verdure and the flowers; the waters flow as if they lived; the sun too lives in its light; and when the moon wanes it is rekindled by the light of the sun, as if it lived anew.

In the introduction to her first book, *Scivias*, Hildegard tells us that she told only a few select people about her early visions and concealed her “gift in quiet silence.” Her family, however, probably had some notion the visions were occurring or that Hildegard was “different” in some way. In fact, Sabina Flanagan suggests in her book *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* that Hildegard’s unusual abilities may well have been one of the reasons her parents made the decision when she was very young to dedicate her to God and offer her up to life in a convent.

Accordingly, when Hildegard reached the age of eight she was taken to a nearby Benedictine monastery and given over to the religious life. Although this practice was not unusual in the Middle Ages — particularly since Hildegard was the tenth child and thus viewed as a “tithe” to God — the way in which it was done was unusual. Hildegard’s parents didn’t just send her to a nunnery; they had her enclosed in the cell of an anchoress — a woman who allows herself to be symbolically “buried alive” in commitment to God. This particular anchoress was named Jutta, and her story is made somewhat romantic by the fact that she was the beautiful daughter of a noble family. The small cell in which she and, eventually, Hildegard were quite literally imprisoned was attached to a Benedictine monastery in Disibodenberg. Over the years, Jutta taught Hildegard Latin and the religious observances. It may well be that Jutta even provided Hildegard with early musical instruction that laid the groundwork for Hildegard’s later extraordinary musical compositions.

For all intents and purposes both Hildegard and Jutta should have remained “entombed” in their cell for their entire lives, but events conspired to alter the situation. Although it is unclear exactly how this happened, it is known that an increasing number of young women were attracted by Jutta’s story and came to join her. It can be supposed that the cell simply became too small and was, out of necessity, expanded over time until Jutta became the Abbess of what was recognized as an official convent attached to the monastery. These changes had all transpired by the time Hildegard was fifteen and took her final religious vows and became a nun.

Little else is known about Hildegard’s life during these years in the convent; she must have distinguished herself in some way, however, because when the Abbess Jutta died in 1136 Hildegard was unanimously chosen as her successor. After this, Hildegard’s life seems to have unfolded uneventfully enough for about five more years until she had a direct experience of the “living light” itself which was quite different from the “reflection of the living light” that she had envisioned continually since childhood. This profound vision literally transformed her consciousness. In *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, Sabina Flanagan quotes Hildegard’s description of the experience as it appears in the introduction to *Scivias*:

And it came to pass in the eleven hundred and forty-first year of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Son of God, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming . . . and suddenly I understood the meaning of the expositions of the books, that is to say of the psalter, the evangelists, and other catholic books of the Old and New Testaments.

According to Hildegard, this sudden change in her ability to comprehend these texts occurred in spite of the fact that she did not previously know how to interpret the words of the Latin texts, to understand the grammar, or to even know how the syllables of the words were divided.

This type of transformation in the level of understanding — accompanied by an overwhelming vision of light — is frequently alluded to in the writings on the awakening of kundalini. For example, Rasarnava describes the state of *Jivan-Mukta* (perennial enlightenment or liberation) in words that are strikingly reminiscent of Hildegard's:

The light of pure intelligence shines forth into certain men of holy vision, Which, seated between the two eye brows, illumines the universe, like fire, or lightning, or the sun.

A similar example of how a profound experience of the divine light can be accompanied by new levels of intelligence or knowledge can be found in a small book called *Panchastavi* that was probably written in about 800 A.D. in Northern India. The book belongs to the body of literature generally known as the *Shakti* doctrines. In it, we find these words in praise of *Tripura*, a name used interchangeably with several of the more common names for kundalini throughout the verse:

May the Goddess Tripura, who is of the nature of light and sound, shining in the forehead like the lustrous bow of Indra,⁶ in the crown of the head like the luminous white shine of the moon, and in the heart like the never setting splendorous sun . . .

The text then goes on to explain how the devotee who has this experience of light is then blessed with “the unlimited power of faultless expression (genius) in a matter of days.” The same idea is expressed in another verse that describes how this power manifests itself as the nectar of supernal knowledge.

Hildegard's profound mystical experience in 1141 was significant not only because it brought with it a greater level of illumination, but also because the voice in the vision commanded her “to say and write” what she “saw and heard” in her visions.

At first Hildegard refused to do so. She had kept quiet about her mystical visions for years, and she was understandably loathe to break her silence at this point. In the Preface to *Scivias*, she explains that this reticence arose out of a combination of humility, self-doubt, and concern for “evil opinions” — a phrase that might well have alluded to a realistic fear of being accused of witchcraft or possession. Regardless, she continued to refuse to write. She soon fell ill, she says, “pressed down by a scourge of God” and remained so until she finally began to write down her visions and compile them into what would eventually become *Scivias*, a 600-page book that contained both detailed description of her visions and interpretations of what they meant for humankind.

The moment she began to do as the voice within the light had commanded, her illness lifted — and one of the most phenomenal creative outpourings in history began. Between her forty-third year and her death at the age of eighty-one, Hildegard produced what can only be called a monumental amount of literary, poetical, musical, medical, and scientific material. In total, she wrote three lengthy books on her visions, two books on medicine, a book depicting the cosmology of the world, two biographies of saints, a morality play, liturgical poetry, and the words and music to a cycle of over seventy songs. She even wrote a mysterious and apparently unfinished dictionary containing the definitions to some 900 words that appear to be from a completely unknown language. Beyond all this, Hildegard expressed herself artistically by overseeing — if not doing some of the work herself — on a great many illustrations that depict elements from her visions.

A number of factors make this extraordinary output even more amazing. The first is that she spent much of her life in ill health and, as she says, “great suffering.”⁷ The second is that she produced all this material in what little time she could spare from an astonishingly busy daily life. She was not only a nun who spent hours a day reciting the holy offices, she was an Abbess — a demanding and time-consuming job in itself. She was also a physician with a tremendous knowledge of herbs and other healing remedies. Because of this — and because word of her visions spread — she had to deal with an ever-increasing tide of the sick and troubled who sought her out.

⁶ i.e., a rainbow.

⁷ It is generally accepted that Hildegard suffered from, among other things, severely debilitating migraines. It needs to be noted that some scholars and historians, including Charles Singer, have made much of this fact and have proposed that her visions were nothing more than the distortions of perception and the flashing lights often associated with this type of headache. They ascribe her amazing output to a truly exceptional intelligence but unilaterally discount her claim of divine inspiration.



The Human Soul

Her time was also taken with writing literally hundreds of letters and meeting with many important people of her day. She also made four lengthy journeys, each lasting many months, from the convent in order to preach — something that was completely unheard of for a woman of her day. And as will be discussed in more detail later, she spent a tremendous amount of time fighting social injustices and corruption; she became involved in a lengthy battle with the monks in order to break away from the monastery; having done so, she founded a new convent, built it up out of nothing, and founded a second convent some years later.

The other factor that makes her creative productivity so incredible is that she was probably not highly educated. The issue of just how well educated Hildegard was has become a matter of somewhat heated debate. Some scholars — particularly those who doubt her assertion that her creativity was divinely inspired — claim she could not possibly have accomplished what she did without a good deal of education. All we know for sure, however, is that she knew how to read Latin and to write it, if not grammatically correctly, well enough to be understood. Beyond this, she certainly claimed that she had been only “poorly educated.”

Regardless of how much formal education she had acquired, Hildegard’s writing was also thwarted by tremendous doubts about herself. Women, in Hildegard’s day, were generally not considered worthy of receiving direct communications from the Holy Spirit. Still Hildegard did eventually come into her own. In 1148, a papal delegation was sent from a Synod being held at a place called Tier to investigate her. After returning to the Synod, the delegation presented the evidence it had gathered to Pope Eugenius. The pope, basing his decision on both the evidence gathered and the quality of her writings, decreed that Hildegard’s visions were indeed genuine. He then gave her official sanction to write down and to make known the communications she received from the Holy Spirit.

Given the complexity of Hildegard’s life, it’s not surprising that she didn’t complete *Scivias* until 1152 — a full ten years after she had begun it. She then began work on her two medical texts.⁸ The first, *Causes and Cures*, is a collection of medical treatises which contain frank descriptions of gynecology, sexual relations, and other matters of concern to women. The other is the *Book of Simple Medicine*, a herbal focused mostly on women’s common medical problems and complaints.

It is believed that much of the liturgical music and lyrics Hildegard composed was also probably created during this period of her life — even though some of it may have been written in later years or even before her profound experience in 1141. Regardless, by the end of her life Hildegard had composed over seventy songs that were eventually combined into a cycle she called the *Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*. Today, this music is sung and recorded around the world and celebrated for both the powerful, innovative use of melody and for the poetic beauty of the lyrics.

In 1158, Hildegard began writing her second major visionary work, the *Book of Life’s Merits* dealing with specific human vices and their counter-balancing virtues. When it was completed in 1163, Hildegard began the *Book of Divine Works*, her third book describing her visions and elucidating their meanings. Her most ambitious visionary work, it was not completed until 1175, five years before her death.

In addition to her visionary, musical, and medical writings, Hildegard produced the very first morality play — a dramatic form that would become the standard for theatre in the Middle Ages. She also wrote biographies on the lives of St. Rupert and St. Disibod and produced a commentary on the Benedictine rule. She also produced a lengthy cosmology — a book that deals with the structure of the universe — that is an amazing work. In his classic work *From Magic to Science* written in 1958, Dr. Charles Singer gives Hildegard a pivotal place in the history of science. He states that her writings on cosmology “are heralds of the dawn of a new movement” and says that “with her we have left the Dark Ages and the Dawn (of Science) has begun.”

⁸ It should be noted that although most scholars accept Hildegard’s authorship of these two medical texts, not all do.

Given all this, it doesn't seem much of an exaggeration to call Hildegard a creative genius — and, of course, from both the Christian and the yogic perspectives she was a divinely inspired creative genius. As mentioned earlier, there are many references in the yoga literature to the awakening of kundalini being accompanied by the revelation of knowledge, but there are also many references to the ability to express this information in beautiful poetic ways as Hildegard did. Panchastavi refers to this in a number of verses:

O Mother of the Universe, Goddess Tripura, the sphere of Thy surpassing beauty . . . becomes the means of granting...the talents of a poet (to Thy devotees)

And again:

He (Thy devotee), who perceives Thy form, like the white rays of the full moon . . . acquires the gift of limitless flow of words, rich with the ambrosia of sweetness and beauty of expression.

Certainly, Hildegard's work is often filled with such sweet beauty of expression. In addition to the examples of her writing already cited, take these two verses, respectively, "Antiphon for the Holy Spirit" and "Alleluia-verse for the Virgin," both translated by Barbara Newman and found in *Women in Praise of the Sacred*:

Antiphon for the Holy Spirit

*The Spirit of God is a life that bestows life,
root of world-tree and wind in its boughs.
Scrubbing out sin, she rubs oil into wounds.
She is glistening life alluring all praise,
all-awakening, all-resurrecting.*

and

Alleluia-verse for the Virgin

*Alleluia! light burst from your untouched womb
like a flower on the farther side of death.
The world-tree is blossoming.
Two realms become one.*

Beyond the evidence we have that Hildegard's works fit the pattern of someone who was divinely inspired, we have her word on it. She took no personal credit for her writing and musical compositions and claimed repeatedly that it was all, except for her medical writing, received through divine inspiration. As she said in her letter quoted earlier to Guibert of Gembloux, that just as the "sun, the moon, and the stars appear in water" so did "writings, sermons, virtues, and certain human actions" appear to her in the reflection of the living light.

Certainly many references in the texts on yoga attest to the fact that yogis who reach enlightenment develop such visionary abilities. As it states simply in *Panchastavi*:

Those devotees who see Thee clearly like the crescent of the moon shining in the forehead, lighting from its depths the sky of the mind, those wise men soon become seers.

And for many people today, the fact that Hildegard was truly a seer seems self-evident from the work she produced.

Beyond this, it is clear that Hildegard experienced divine revelation and, out of this experience, brought new knowledge to the world. One example of this can be found in the commentaries she provided on passages from the Bible, many of which are only now — more than 800 years after they were written — beginning to be fully understood. Interestingly enough, in the yogic tradition this ability to interpret passages from the holy works in new ways has for centuries been considered a true sign of having reached enlightenment and attained *jnana*, or supernal knowledge. In fact, a yogi who claimed to have reached illumination was tested by being given a passage from one of the sacred texts, asked to meditate upon it, and told to bring back a new interpretation of the words. If the yogi could do so, his or her claim to having awakened Kundalini and reached enlightenment was accepted.

Of course, Hildegard brought new knowledge to the world in a number of other areas as well. Not only did she write the first morality play and develop a cosmology that would herald a new era in scientific thinking, she was pivotal in the development of sapiential theology — a tradition in Christianity that focuses on the divine feminine that is expressed as Wisdom or Sophia in texts such as Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon. In this regard, says Barbara Newman, “We may boldly claim Hildegard as the first Christian thinker to deal seriously and positively with the feminine as such, not merely with the challenges posed by and for women in a male-dominated world.”

From a yogic perspective, Hildegard’s ability to receive divine inspiration and revelation, her visions of light, love, and oneness, and the fact that she lived immersed in “the reflection of the living light” all point to the fact that she had awakened Kundalini and was illuminated. In addition to this, she clearly manifested the personal characteristics of this awakened state that Gopi Krishna compiled from his research into the yogic texts. Three of these characteristics, for example, the absolute belief in the reality of a divine cosmic force, the unshakable belief in the validity of the mystical experience itself, and the loss of fear of death are all demonstrated not only by observations that can be gleaned from her writings but by the way she lived her whole life. Hildegard based her important life decisions strictly on what God told her to do in her visions even when these decisions exposed her to severe censorship and threatened her safety. Even her initial decision to begin publicly proclaiming her visions was a threatening one: a woman claiming to receive divine revelation might well have brought about her death as a witch or heretic if circumstances had been even slightly different.

What’s more, the information she received in her visions was often highly critical of people who quite literally held her fate in their hands. For example, when the Emperor Frederick I (Barbarossa) came into power, he granted Hildegard an edict of imperial protection from the battles and fighting that plagued the land during his reign. This edict guaranteed the safety of Hildegard and her nuns in the convent that Hildegard founded at Rupertsberg — a site that was at considerable distance from the security of the monastery at Disibodenberg. This, however, did not stop Hildegard from reproaching him in the strongest terms when she disagreed with his actions. According to Newman, in one letter to Frederick Hildegard “compares him to an infant and a madman” and in another repeats the words of God that have come to her: “Woe, woe to the malice of wicked men who defy me! Hear this, king, if you wish to live; otherwise my sword shall smite you.” Fortunately for Hildegard, Frederick did not lift his edict of protection — but one suspects it would hardly have fazed Hildegard if he had.

Another characteristic of awakened Kundalini exhibited by Hildegard was her charisma. *Panchastavi* contains many references to awakened yogis whose magnetism is so great that they become “mind-alluring,” “objects of undivided attention,” and are “worshiped even by kings.” Clearly, Hildegard had this kind of effect on people. For example, the Emperor Frederick put up with a diatribe from her that would have gotten most people beheaded; she attracted large crowds when she spoke outside the convent, and many young women of noble birth were drawn to the convent because of her. But perhaps her personal charisma is best exemplified by the story of how she came to found the convent that was separated from the monks at Disibodenberg.

After the Tier Synod in 1148, Hildegard’s fame grew and the number of postulants increased until the monastery at Disibodenberg could not house them. While the monks were making plans to expand the convent, Hildegard received word from the Holy Spirit that she was to found a convent of her own about 30 kilometers from Disibodenberg on a hill, Rupertsberg, that overlooked the juncture of the Rhine and Nahe rivers at Bingen. When she brought word of this divine command to the Abbot of the monastery, he flatly refused to give her permission to leave. The monks, naturally, did not want to lose the prestige associated with Hildegard, the land and money the new postulants were bringing to the monastery, or the gifts from the faithful that Hildegard’s fame as a visionary were attracting.

When the Abbot persisted in his refusal, Hildegard took to her bed with a paralyzing illness, saying it was caused by being kept from fulfilling God’s will. Eventually, the church authorities relented, and in about 1150 eighteen of the nuns followed Hildegard to the site that had been revealed to her. That these women moved with her is a testament to their belief in her and to the dedication she inspired in them. She was not just proposing to move them from one convent to another but as Sabina Flanagan quotes from the *Life of St. Hildegard (Vita Sanctae Hildegardis)* “to go from lush fields and vineyards and the comforts of home to a desert place, devoid of amenities” and “to move from a place where they wanted for nothing to such great poverty.” The nuns’ parents must also have objected strenuously to their moving — these were not girls who’d come from poverty and want, they were nobly born and wealthy ladies who had never known any form of hardship. And to

make their decision to follow Hildegard even more difficult, the monks refused to allow the nuns to take the dowries (the money and lands they had originally brought with them on their entry into the convent at Disibodenberg) with them to Rupertsberg. This meant the wealth that was rightfully theirs and that would have helped provided some degree of comfort and security in their new home was denied them.

Still, follow Hildegard they did. And although there was some disaffection among them, almost all of them stood by Hildegard through a period of severe adversity that lasted a full eight years. Ironically, the personal

charisma that was undoubtedly a factor in securing the nuns' dedication was also one of the things that increased their hardships: as Hildegard's fame spread the number of guests, pilgrims, and supplicants to her healing ministries increased, and the feeding and housing of these people created a tremendous drain on the meager resources of the convent.

In spite of these difficulties, Hildegard and her band of followers persevered and were eventually rewarded. As Flanagan quotes Hildegard's words in the *Vita*: "But we were awaiting the grace of God, who showed us this place, to come to our aid. After the burden of these troubles God rained grace upon us." This grace included the Archbishop of Mainz giving Hildegard his official protection in 1158 and making a ruling that Mainz — and not the monks at Disibodenberg — would regulate the financial and secular relations between the two bodies thus giving Hildegard more independence and assuring the convent far more financial security. Over the next several years Hildegard's fame continued to spread and by 1165 she had attracted so many postulants to her community that she needed to found a second convent, or a daughter house, on the other side of the Rhine near a village called Ebingen.

Yet another personal characteristic that invites comparison between Hildegard and the enlightened yogi is her highly moral, ethical nature and the way it was expressed in her deep desire to ease the suffering of humanity. As Gopi Krishna expressed it in his book *Higher Consciousness*, the illuminati often present us with examples of "unparalleled acts of altruism, charity, benevolence, heroism, self-sacrifice, and even martyrdom" in their lives.



Light Stars, Dark Stars

This aspect of Hildegard's life was particularly evident in her work as a physician. Even though the countless people who came to the convent seeking medical help must have been a tremendous drain on the time she needed to deal with her other pressing duties, Hildegard did not set her interest in medicine aside. She also took the time to respond to the copious letters she received from nobles and commoners alike, seeking painstakingly in each response to communicate something that would help ease the person's suffering. And although she cared about all people, regardless of gender, she seems to have been especially touched by the anguish of women. Much of the material in *Causes and Cures* and the *Book of Simple Medicine* deals with menstruation, conception, pregnancy, child-birth, and other women's issues. As Barbara Newman points out, although Hildegard cared deeply about the health of men, her, ". . . medical works and her reputed miracles reveal a solicitude for all the afflictions of women — in physical and mental illness, in barrenness and child-birth, in the throes of passion and the trials of marriage."

Beyond this, the fact that she took the time to write her two medical texts at all speaks to her desire to ease suffering. These were the only manuscripts she wrote that did not come from her visions. In other words, she had not been commanded by the holy spirit to write them and yet, in spite of the almost unimaginable pressures and constraints upon her, she did.

Hildegard was not only compassionate, she was also a virtual firebrand when it came to issues of what we would call today social justice. She literally railed — with no concern for her own safety or well-being — against anyone she believed was unethical. To this end, she wrote letters to kings, princes, bishops, and the Pope alike deploring the dissolution and corruption she saw around her. One good example of this is her unrestrained criticism, mentioned earlier, of Frederick I. Another can be found in a letter she wrote, cited by Newman, to the

general chapter of the Cistercians, an order of monks who had found the courage to ask her “what in us and our order is displeasing to you, or rather to the eyes of God.” Hildegard, says Newman, answers them by alluding to a “plethora of faults, notably presumption, instability, hypocrisy, and schism.” The letter itself begins with the words, “O sons of Israel, why have you corrupted tender Love,” and goes on to use terms that range from “audacious” to “wicked” to refer to the order.

If Hildegard called on her brothers to maintain the highest ethical standards, however, she did the same for herself and nothing, not even the dictates of the highest church authorities, could make her go against something she believed was right. One of the most heartbreaking examples of this came near the end of her life when she faced what was probably her greatest trial. In 1178, when Hildegard was over 80 years old, she received word from the Archbishop of Mainz that she had to disinter the body of a nobleman who had been buried in the churchyard at Rupertsberg. Mainz claimed that the man had died excommunicate and therefore had not been entitled to burial in consecrated ground. Hildegard politely refused, replying that to her own knowledge the man had been absolved and had been reconciled with the church before death and to remove him from sacred ground would be a terrible sin. When Mainz persisted with their demands, Hildegard made a show of blessing the man’s burial site, and later even went so far as to disguise the man’s grave so that representatives from Mainz wouldn’t be able to find him even if they wanted to.

In order to try to force Hildegard to relent, her entire convent was placed under interdict. The terms of the interdict all but excommunicated the women and must have seemed like an unbearable sentence to them all. They were forbidden to partake of Mass, and they could only perform the Holy Offices — the prayers that they were accustomed to recite for literally hours every day — in a subdued form behind closed doors. They were also forbidden to use any liturgical music, a punishment that may have been the most intolerable of all given Hildegard’s extraordinary musical ability, her often expressed love for music, and the pivotal role it would have played in the daily life of any convent under her direction.

In spite of the fact that Hildegard produced reliable witnesses who corroborated her story, the dispute raged for months and the nuns continued to suffer under the interdict. Finally, in March of 1179 Hildegard was proven right and the interdict was lifted. That Hildegard remained unbowed under such harsh treatment is more than ample evidence that she had the highest moral and ethical character — especially considering the fact that she was more than eighty years old and was growing physically weaker as the battle dragged on. In fact, only six more months remained in Hildegard’s life after the interdict was ended and she died in September of 1179.

The movement to canonize Hildegard began almost immediately after her death, but interestingly enough it never came to fruition. Not one of the official attempts to have Hildegard formally declared a saint over the centuries were ever concluded. Nonetheless, the people’s devotion to her and their belief in her saintliness continued to grow until the 16th century when her name seems to have somehow slipped into a *Roman Martyrology* and from that time forward been included among the saints.

It seems fitting that Hildegard was essentially declared a saint, not by the hierarchy of the church, but by the people’s reverence for her. She lived a passionate and compassionate life, not only immersed in the living Light, but reflecting it outward in one of the clearest examples of illumination the world has seen. If she had lived her life not in the hills along the River Rhine but in the shadows of the Himalayas, the people there would surely have recognized her as a rare, enlightened yogini. In fact, these words in *Panchastavi* could well have been written about her:

Only a few . . . became great poets, pure in heart, of great wisdom and noble deeds, won to fame which resounded in the three worlds, stainless like the moon, silk, milk, or snow.

Certainly Hildegard was all these things — a pure, wise, noble, beloved, and divinely inspired poet whose living Light shines white, bright, and stainlessly today as it did nine hundred years ago.