

Goose bumps: Phenomenon of spirituality and body-mind cleansing?

By Floco Tausin

Abstract

Many of us experience that prickly feeling with our body hair standing on end and our skin in goose bumps at various times. This is often associated with chills, shivers and certain emotional states. Less known, however, is that this prickle is informative and effective in the fields of health care and spirituality. This is suggested by both medical studies and the experience of spiritual masters from various cultures.

Key words: goose bumps, hair standing on end, prickly sensations, holistic healing, spirituality

The spiritual significance of prickling

If the spiritual dimension of the prickly feeling is not immediately evident to us, it may be because our familiar sources of information don't make ties between the two. According to current understandings of physiology, goose bumps are a relic of a distant past, when the hominids of prehistoric times were still covered with dense hair. The erection of the hair provided protection from the cold and made them look bigger and more menacing – which may have helped averting combats in threatening situations. For relatively hairless and clean-shaven modern people, however, these erections of sparse body hair and prickly feeling have lost these functions (Bubenick, 2003; cf. Gieler, 2002).

Subjective aspects of prickly feelings, however, remain. The Bible, for instance, links this phenomenon to fear and terror: "Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up." (Job 4,14-15) to harmonious music (cf. Grewe et al., 2005; Becker, 2004), looking at touching natural phenomena, or feeling one with a person we love.

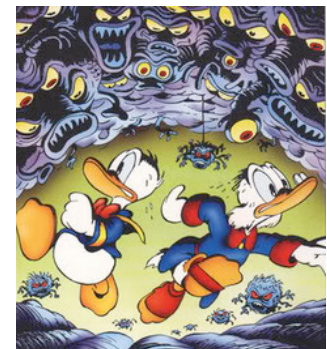


Figure 1.
Example from the
popular media:
Ducks experiencing
goose bumps

Religious and spiritual traditions of non-Western cultures point to another aspect of this phenomenon. Prickly feelings are associated with meditative and ecstatic states, often while experiencing a deep



Figure 2:
Prickling touch
per the Kamasutra

devotional love towards a deity. This is not so difficult for us to comprehend if we remember that we know this feeling from very beautiful moments, be it while listening

In love and sexuality, a dermal prickling may be the result of deep and conscious relaxation of body and mind. The *Kamasutra*, a fourth century Indian textbook of carnal love, teaches a particular type of touch that will cause such prickling (Kamasutra 4. 10). Psychologist J. Panksepp observed neurochemical similarities between the prickly feeling and sexual orgasms – pointing to the fact that an exhilarating prickle involving the whole body is often felt during intense orgasms. This has been called 'skin orgasm' or 'full body orgasm' (Panksepp 1995; cf. Becker, 2004).

Now we understand the deeper meaning prickling has for many masters who transformed carnal love into spiritual love: love is not directed to a person, but to God. The sexual orgasm is replaced by a whole body orgasm with an overwhelming and ecstatic prickling that resonates throughout the body.

- The Indian Yoga textbook *Gherandasamhita*, for example, classifies the prickly feeling as a phenomenon of *bhakti*, or devotional love (7,14-15).

- In the Hindu epics and legends, the hair of the bodies of heroes, yogis and gods are described as rising when they behold divine beings or hear timeless truths. Arjuna, the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*, finds that his hair stands on end when he recognizes the universal nature of his charioteer, the god Krishna (*Bhagavad Gita* 11,14). The *Bhagavata Purana*, focused on devotional love for the incarnations of Vishnu, particularly Krishna, clearly states: "How can without bhakti one's hair stand on end, without loving service the heart melt, without devotion the tears flow, the bliss be and one's consciousness be purified?" (Canto 11,14,23)

In religious literature, the prickly feeling is also mentioned as an aspect of deep contemplation and meditation.

- In the *Abhidhamma*, the most recent part of the Buddhist Pali canon, the sensation of prickling indicates a certain level of meditation: after the thoughts have ceased to flow, an overwhelming joy (*priti*) spreads throughout the whole body and may intensify to total ecstasy (cf. Guenther, 1974).



Figure 3.
Arjuna's hair stands on
end as he beholds god
Krishna

- The phenomenon is not unknown to some mystics of the Semitic religions. Church father Augustine (4th century) may have experienced a “holy shiver” that suddenly has come over him and let him recognize the invisible nature of the creation of God (*Confessiones* by Augustinus, transl. by Georg Rapp, 1838). The 11th century Islamic mystic al-Qusayri connects goose bumps to the state of deep humility (*tawadu*) and the disclosure of truth (cf. Hartmann, 1914).

- The prickly feeling is often reported by members of societies that use ritual techniques of ecstasy and trances to achieve altered states of consciousness. We have anthropological data suggesting a close connection between goose bumps and ecstatic states or trance from Bengal, Micronesia and South America, where the tingling is often associated with the presence of super-human powers and certain states of the soul (Goodenough, 2002; McDaniel, 1989; Figge, 1973).

Healing through prickling – a holistic and energetic perspective

If the prickly feeling is associated with devotional love, ecstasy and altered states of consciousness in general, we can understand it as a symptom of holistic development and healing. But how is this phenomenon associated with healing? Could it contribute to the changes associated with healing?

To answer that question, I'd like to consider the view inspired by my teacher, Nestor, a seer and mystic living in the Swiss Emmental. In Nestor's experience, intense prickly sensations (which he calls “ecstasy”) is excess subtle energy flowing out of the body-mind and altering consciousness. This consciousness change results in a more relaxed state of the body-mind, enabling the perception of subtle energetic phenomena (e.g. “eye floaters” and other so-called entoptic phenomena, cf. Tausin, 2009). The relevance to healing is, in Nestor's terms, that energy flowing out of the body dissolves subtle blockades and brings about cleansing – just as sweating, urinating and defecating do on a more material level. This theory corresponds with the Ayurvedic teaching that associates prickling with the *vyana vata* or *vyana vayu* respectively, a wind or ethereal energy that governs all circulation (cf. Sadashiva Tirtha, 2005). Generally speaking, prickling points to an increased subtle energy and circulation that may stand for cleansing processes.

Like Ayurveda, Western academic medicine does not explicitly associate cleaning effects with the prickle phenomenon. Rather, it is labeled as a symptom of various, often infectious diseases, such as cold, faint, dizziness, numbness and other problems. There are indications, however, that the prickling is, like fever, a defensive reaction of the body. For instance, certain medicine can cause prickly feelings in patients. Interpreted from the perspective of energy, the active agent of the medicine causes the patient's subtle energy to flow out of the body-mind through the energetic processes associated with the prickly feeling and, thus, to clear body and mind of the problems that are present.

There are also statistical studies suggesting that prickling sensations may have an unexplored health benefit. In a clinical study, J. T. Van Dissel and colleagues from Leiden University Medical Center in The Netherlands (2005), evaluated the predictive value of chills, bacteriemia (presence of bacteria in the blood) and endotoxemia (presence of bacterial toxins in the blood) on in-hospital mortality and survival. Chills are understood as perception of cold and involuntary muscle tremor. Van Dissel et al. found that patients with chills had a significantly higher survival rate at long-term follow-up compared with those patients who do not experience chills. The

researchers suspect that, in general, patients with chills are able to respond more effectively to diseases. Since chills often are associated with prickly feelings, I suggest that it is reasonable to apply the results of this study to that phenomenon, too.

Let us explore further the energetic-cathartic interpretation of the cleansing effect on a psychological level associated with the prickling. Inner tensions may be made conscious and get resolved through the experience of the prickly feeling. In fear situations, for example, where our heart races and we may tremble, it is the energy of fear that we release through our body-mind. Nestor's teaching and my own experience suggest to me that with increasing progress in any practice of conscious living addressing both, body and mind, fear symptoms like tremors and heart palpitations will diminish and cease. This allows us not only to stay calm and centered in such situations, but we can even learn to enjoy this energy, as when we engage in sports that may involve dangers but give us a thrill. In such situations, fear is not losing its energy but rather losing its emotional power over us. I understand emotion as subtle energy that could not flow freely and therefore causes emotional symptoms (Tausin, 2009).

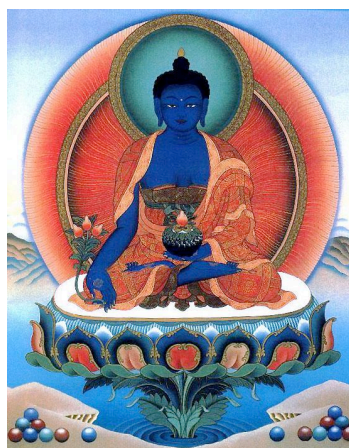


Figure 4.
Tibetan Medicine
Buddha: Does he heal
through his ecstatic
energy radiating from
his body?

Prickling in the head, which sometimes is noticed in states of intense anger, may indicate similar releases of energies that allow us to immediately become calm and relaxed. Here, we have not suppressed the aggression but rather have let its energy flow out of our body without being rude or even destructive to ourselves or others. We have overcome the anger.

The same happens with strong affection in love or sexuality. A conversation with a sympathetic human being can cause a relaxing, prickly feeling. This process enables us to enjoy that moment free from possible oppressive constraints and desires. Also, those who try to transform their sexual energy through Tantric practices or sexual Kung Fu will increasingly experience hair standing on end, indicating the outflow of transformed sexual energy – by way of an ecstatic full body orgasm, which relaxes and strengthens body and mind and lets us experience a beautiful and joyful environment (cf. Chia/Winn 1984; Chia/Chia 2005).

These are just a few examples of prickly feelings which may be experienced by different people in different positive and negative emotional situations. In all these cases, the prickly feeling is associated with bioenergetic shifts and energy releases of the body-mind that dissolve and release emotional tensions as pure energy. The prickly feeling itself not only indicates these processes, but alerts and awakens us, through these sensations, to experience them in an attentive and conscious way.

In summary

The phenomenon of the prickly sensation indicates holistic body-mind processes which are relevant to medicine, psychology and spirituality. With regard to healing, the prickle phenomenon may be understood as a release of subtle energy that clears the body and mind. Intensifying that process through various meditative and ecstatic exercises has been relevant to the practice of many individuals dedicated to the spiritual quest for wisdom and self-realization.

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Figure 1. Ducks experiencing goose bumps

(http://media.photobucket.com/image/donald%20duck/jesse_pindus/it_zp_0124a_001.jpg?o=1929 (24.2.11))

Figure 2. Prickling touch per the Kamasutra. Photobucket

(<http://media.photobucket.com/image/kamasutra/rio1714/kamasutra.jpg?o=106> (24.2.11))

Figure 3: Arjuna's hair stands on end as he beholds god Krishna

(<http://media.photobucket.com/image/bhagavad%20gita/maniaps/TA0050.jpg?o=6> (24.2.11))

Figure 4. Tibetan Medicine Buddha: Does he heal through his ecstatic energy radiating from his body? Photobucket

(<http://media.photobucket.com/image/medicine%20buddha/gwandana/buddha.jpg?o=7> (24.2.11))

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