

# THE PLATEAU EXPERIENCE: AN EXPLORATION OF ITS ORIGINS, CHARACTERISTICS, AND POTENTIAL

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*ABSTRACT:* In the nineteen months between heart attacks, one near fatal and the other fatal, Abraham Maslow—one of the most influential psychologists of modern times—experienced a significant paradigm shift. During this period he began describing a state of transpersonal consciousness resembling but distinct from his earlier concept of peak experiences, calling it the *plateau experience*. Despite his enthusiasm, intention to elaborate, and prominence in the field of psychology, after his death this emergent theory largely fizzled into obscurity. Almost fifty years on, this article is an attempt to dust off and look again with fresh eyes at a theory of potentially significant value to the field of transpersonal psychology and beyond in an increasingly troubled world. A review of the relevant literature preceding, bequeathed by, and succeeding Maslow is explored, highlighting the potential this theory holds now and into the future.

On June 8, 1970, at age sixty-two and in the midst of a distinguished career, Abraham Maslow silently collapsed and died from a heart attack. Approximately nineteen months earlier, he had experienced a near-fatal heart attack. This period between heart attacks was marked by a significant shift in his values and awareness—a distinctive experience of transcendence—which he came to call the *plateau experience* (Krippner, 1972), a name implying a retreat from the peak states or experiences (Heitzman, 2003) for which he had become so well known. In facing death, his attitude towards life changed, prompting a revision and expansion of his earlier thought on self-actualization and self-transcendence, and the relationship between them. Prior to his plateau experience, Maslow had stated, “The greatest attainment of identity, autonomy, or self-hood is itself, a going beyond and above selfhood” (Maslow, 1961, p.105). His plateau experience appears to have provided a deeper embodied understanding of this ultimate existential paradox that he spent the final months of his life seeking to philosophically apprehend (Cleary, 1996). Although his quest remained unfinished at the time of his death (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995), such open-endedness would have likely suited Maslow for, according to his biographer, “he regarded himself as a psychological pioneer, broadly exploring new territories of human experience that later investigators would map in detail” (Hoffman, 2008a, p. 442).

Almost fifty years on his ideas and ideals have not yet been completely assimilated by the psychological sciences, including humanistic and transpersonal, both of which he was instrumental in instigating, leaving behind a rich potential for exploration (Leontiev, 2008). Not only is his enduring hierarchy of human needs inaccurately maintained in psychology texts (Koltko-Rivera,

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2006), his work on the plateau experience remains undervalued (Hoffman, 2008b) and obscure (Buckler, 2011) despite holding interest not only as a topic in its own right but also for its potential contributions to understanding and exploring “the farther reaches of human nature” (Maslow, 1971), particularly in regards to transpersonal consciousness, development, and insight (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995).

An academic database title search of “plateau experience” on *ProQuest* currently generates only three dissertations and two journal articles of relevance. Locating information on the plateau experience is much like entering the rabbit-hole to Wonderland or going up the mountain path both literally (as in *The Mountain Path* magazine, following a small but significant footnote in one of the few original documents on the plateau experience) and figuratively, as in the high plateau of the spiritual mountain (Osborne, 2001) from which the name is derived. Maslow made few published statements about the plateau experience (International Study Project, 1972; Krippner, 1972; Maslow 1969, 1970, 1971) and left a sprinkling of journal entries (1979). Investigation is scant; a substantial treatment of Maslow’s plateau experience did not emerge until almost three decades later (Clearly, 1996), and it remains the most frequently cited source aside from Maslow’s own statements.

Maslow considered there to be much more to say about the plateau experience and anticipated a more detailed study he had hoped to write (Maslow, 1971). He foresaw studies measuring plateau experience brainwaves and biofeedback (Krippner, 1972), and offered encouragement to those who sought to develop it, even suggesting “classes in miraculousness” (Krippner, 1972, p.114). Moreover, he claimed that “individuals capable of having transcendent experiences lived potentially fuller and healthier lives than the majority of humanity because [they] were able to transcend everyday frustrations and conflicts and were less driven by neurotic tendencies” (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995, p.6). Clearly, the lacuna between what the plateau experience could contribute and the current state of affairs is apparent.

Maslow’s ideas remain pertinent to our world today and his greatest project for us may yet lie ahead (Leontiev, 2008). His idealism about human nature at its best, which he called *metahumanness* (Maslow, 1969), offers “optimism in a world where human civilization and humanity itself is at risk” (Hoffman, 2008b, p.457). Maslow was a pragmatic idealist who believed that people with access to transcendent states of being pay more attention to the world and make efforts to altruistically improve it (Maslow, 1970). Yet he cautioned against the “Big-Bang” theory of self-actualization, recognizing one of the tasks of transpersonal psychology is to better communicate an “appreciation of patience ... for the miraculous elements in ordinary existence” (Maslow, cited in Krippner, 1972, p.120). That is, beyond the orgasmic peaks of the “mystic gone wild” (Maslow, cited in Krippner, 1972, p.107) exists a less intense and more enduring state of simultaneously miraculous and ordinary consciousness—the plateau (Maslow, 1970)—a state said to be the true final goal of the mystic’s endeavors (Asrani, 1969b).

The great lesson from the true mystics, from the Zen monks, and now also from the Humanistic and Transpersonal psychologists—is that the sacred is in the ordinary, that is to be found in one’s daily life, in one’s neighbors, friends, and family, in one’s back yard. (Maslow, 1970, p.85)

Maslow is not alone in his heuristic observation of the ultimate goal. Ferrer adds,

The goal of the spiritual quest is not to have spiritual experiences, but to stabilize spiritual consciousness, live a spiritual life, and transform the world accordingly ... it is a hallmark of genuine transpersonal development. (2002, p.37)

Despite the personal significance of the plateau experience, Maslow did not engage a comprehensive study of the phenomenon, partly because of his weakened physical condition but also due to his abhorration of the hedonistic 1960s “drug and hippy” American zeitgeist that came to be associated with mysticism (Hoffman, 2008a). Had he continued elaborating his later thoughts, a new general theory of personality may have emerged (Leontiev, 2008). The zeitgeist, meanwhile, has not much matured. Today’s spiritual materialism (Trungpa, 2002), spiritual bypassing (Welwood, 1984), New Age fundamentalism (Babbs, 1991), fast food spirituality (Dasa, 2012), and religious violence on the daily news would likely have Maslow writhing in his grave; the pressing need to understand the positive *and* negative poles of self-transcendence grows (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Ferrer (2002) points out that Western transpersonal psychology’s emphasis on experiential processes and peak states, towards which Maslow’s earlier ideas play a significant role, have often neglected the proper preparations, maturity, and ethical scaffolding long-standing spiritual traditions usually provide. As a result, in-vogue transient experiences have been able to usurp long-term transformations (Ferrer, 2002), an appetite that arguably continues today. If, as Ram Dass (2014) suggests, becoming enamored in spiritual phenomena often remains “too tasty” to disentangle oneself from in the face of the ordinariness of true spiritual freedom, then perhaps turning towards the plateau experience provides a sound remedy—the promise of staying “turned on” (Maslow, 1970, p. xvi).

Inspired by Maslow’s later vision and intrigued by the lure of an incomplete and largely ignored theory, this discussion seeks to explore the plateau experience through the relevant literature preceding, bequeathed by, and succeeding Maslow. Due to the specific circumstances in which the plateau theory arose, Maslow’s significance to psychology (particularly humanistic and transpersonal), and the lack of literature in this area, the scope of the literature review has been extended to encompass a broad timeframe: Part I explores Maslow’s own statements on the plateau experience; Part II looks at the Asian ideas and philosophies that influenced Maslow’s plateau theory; Part III chronologically presents relevant literature after Maslow’s death that has significantly added to or refined the theory; and Part IV provides an overview of the plateau experience as represented in core reference texts in the field of transpersonal psychology today as well as suggestions for future research.

Despite its potential, the plateau experience continues to lurk under the radar of psychological inquiry. Yet, if Maslow's conviction about the plateau experience as an enabler for one to live in a world of continual miracles and still "run a grocery store and pay the bills" (Maslow, cited in Krippner, 1972, p.115) is true, then clearly, our work here has only just begun.

## I. MASLOW'S STATEMENTS ON THE PLATEAU EXPERIENCE

Defining the plateau experience remains nebulous as Maslow did not provide a succinct characterization and upon his death was still attempting to discern the nuances of his experience. The plateau experience served, for Maslow, more as a term to refer to "a constellation of extraordinary experiences, which shared some similar features with peak experiences, but were also distinctly unique" (Heitzman, 2003, p.2). Nonetheless, the essence of this constellation can be gradually revealed through the morsels available.

Maslow first expounded his ideas about the plateau experience on March 17, 1970, at the University of California, in a discussion on *transcending self-actualizers*, i.e., "psychologically healthy, fully human highly evolved, fully matured persons" (Maslow, cited in Cleary, 1996, p.226). He called transcending self-actualizers *Theory-Z* people (Maslow, 1971), characterized by having peak and plateau experiences, and contrasted them to nontranscending self-actualizers, or *Theory-Y* people. He said,

One of the things that comes with age is that the cognitive elements become greater and greater as the emotional poignancy sort of slackens off and dies out ... called the "plateau experience" ... the illuminative aspects—the knowledge aspects, the sacralizing of the world—now become very easy and can be turned on and turned off just as I please ... The only trouble is that your goddam body can't keep up with you. (Maslow, cited in Cleary, 1996, pp.229–230)

Indeed, Maslow's body was struggling to keep up with him, and little time remained between this first public description of the plateau experience and his soon to come fatal heart attack—less than three months. On April 17, 1970, at the Second Interdisciplinary Conference on the Voluntary Control of Internal States, Maslow elaborated his description of the plateau experience. Amidst colleagues from the then dawning field of transpersonal psychology (Krippner, 1972)—the "farthest out group in the country" (Maslow, 4/19/1970)—he shared the following:

Something else happened[,] which has come into my consciousness[,] which is a very precious thing. A sort of precipitation occurred of what might be called the sedimentation or fallout from illuminations, insights, and other life experiences that were very important—tragic experiences included. The result has been a kind of unitive consciousness ... the simultaneous perception of the sacred and the ordinary, or the miraculous and the ordinary, or the miraculous and the rather constant or easy-without-effort

sort of thing. I now perceive under the aspect of eternity and become mythic, poetic, and symbolic about ordinary things ... one lives in a world of miracles all the time. There is a paradox because it is miraculous and yet it doesn't produce an autonomic burst. This type of consciousness has certain elements in common with peak experiences—awe, mystery, surprise, and esthetic shock ... but are constant rather than climactic ... The words I would use to describe this kind of experience would be a “high plateau.” (Maslow, cited in Krippner, 1972, pp. 113–114)

He went on to provide further contrasts with the peak experience, including the plateau experience's voluntariness as opposed to the involuntariness of peaks, its long lasting serenity as opposed to the quick climactic orgasmic nature of the peak, its essentially cognitive nature as opposed to the emotional intensity of the peak, and its more mundane permanence as opposed to the acute mystical experience (Krippner, 1972, pp.114–115). He intuited the shift from peak to plateau experiences related to the natural ageing process, i.e., “nature's way of protecting the body” (Krippner, 1972, p.113) from the turmoil peak experiences can produce. Maslow also offered several defining characteristics of the plateau experience with examples derived from personal observation including the “normal” transcendence of time and space, the confrontation and appreciation of one's mortality, the synthesis of dualities into a single unity, the grasping of the paradoxical nature of one's simultaneous permanence and impermanence, and a shift in life values “about what's basic and what's not basic, what's important and what's not important” (Maslow, 4/19/1970, pp.116–119), claims Maslow noted that have been described in many literatures of the world and should not be considered esoteric or mysterious (Krippner, 1972).

An intensive in-depth psychobiographical case study of Maslow's post-mortem life—the period between heart attacks—by Heitzman (2003), suggests the concept of the plateau experience was Maslow's philosophical reckoning with his own fear of death, a process he understood to entail transcendence of the ego. She points out that pioneering research into near-death experiences (NDEs) by Ring (2000) suggests Maslow's state of mind was not unique, as consistent and enduring changes after a NDE often include an enhanced appreciation for life, greater self-acceptance, a concern for others, reverence for life, anti-competitiveness, enhanced spirituality, reduced fear of death, expanded mental awareness, and a quest for knowledge, all of which featured in Maslow's shifted values after the first heart attack and continued until his ultimate death (Heitzman, 2001). Conclusions Ring makes that further resonate with Maslow's experience are: (a) the value of a NDE comes from the translation of its wisdom into daily life, which corresponds with Maslow's sense of the sacred in the ordinary, and (b) significant changes are not always simply a matter of receiving a gift; rather, work is involved to unwrap it (Heitzman, 2003), paralleling Maslow's belief that “plateau-experiencing can be achieved, learned, [and] earned by hard work” (Maslow, cited in Cleary, 1996, p.224). In the plateau, his life and death became inseparable, along with heightened vulnerability, fragility, preciousness, wonder, and sense of impermanence (Heitzman, 2001).

Maslow's statements about the plateau experience are poignant, relaxed, and interwoven with empirical disclosures, revealing more of the man behind the theory than previous works. Heitzman (2003) urges consideration of Maslow's descriptions of the plateau experience take into account his intrapsychic processes at the time, for they provided a catalyst for his emergent theory and influenced the themes he provided. According to her psychobiographical analysis, four topics of great importance at his end of life were: (a) why babies are loveable, (b) aggridance (his term for the superior, dominant, and aggrandizing qualities he observed in primates), (c) evil, and (d) mortality awareness, all of which he believed were connected. She concludes these themes represent internal conflicts he struggled with much of his life, to which he eventually yielded, entering "a more inclusive experience of himself and the world in which he lived ... [a] revelation coincid[ing] with the recording of his personal plateau experiences" (Heitzman, 2003, p.iii).

A further description of the plateau experience is found in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971), which Maslow was about to start revising and expanding when his fatal heart attack struck.

Transcendence can mean to live in the realm of ... plateau living ... After the insight or the great conversion, or the great mystic experience, or the great illumination, or the great full awakening, one can calm down as the novelty disappears, and as one gets used to good things or even great things, live casually in heaven and be on easy terms with the eternal and infinite ... In plateau cognition, one becomes perfect, or can see oneself as perfect, e.g., in that moment I can love all and accept all, forgive all, be reconciled even to the evil that hurts me. I can understand and enjoy the way things are. And I can then even feel some subjective equivalent of what has been attributed to the gods only, i.e., omniscience, omnipotence, ubiquity ... Perhaps the best word in order to stress that this is part of human nature, even though at its best, is the word *metahumanness*. (pp. 265–268)

Maslow was puzzled at his capacity to enjoy the plateau experience (Maslow, 3/28/1970) because it contradicted his own Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943, 1954), which posited survival as the most fundamental human need, and yet it was a threat to his very survival through a NDE that prompted an enhanced sense of awareness (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995). He openly questioned his own assumption that self-transcendent states occur only after satisfying lower needs (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995), criticisms shared by Daniels (1988) and Rowan (1987). He eventually conceded that "the desire to transcend one's nature was as much an aspect of human nature as lower needs and the denial of this ultimate need might be as harmful as the denial of one's lower needs" (Maslow, cited in Cleary & Shapiro, 1995, p.16). That is, a persistent deprivation of *metaneeds* [i.e., the higher needs in Maslow's hierarchy] and lack of fulfillment of *metamotivations* [i.e., the natural motivation prompting self-transcendence] could lead to *metapathologies* [i.e., spiritual ailments], such as cynicism, apathy, boredom, loss of zest, despair, hopelessness, a sense of powerlessness, and nihilism (Kolko-Rivera, 2006). Surprisingly, Maslow came to the supposition that self-transcenders would experience *more* pathological

symptoms, i.e., metapathologies, than self-actualizers because if one tries to transcend healthy self-actualization, “*then troubles (of the highest type) begin*” (Maslow, cited in Kolko-Rivera, 2006, p.305)—troubles he touted and praised. To reconcile the contradiction, he coined the phrases *psychic economy of plenty* (Maslow, 3/28/1970) to “describe how a state of enhanced consciousness could occur despite a threat to survival” (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995, p.17) and *psychic economy of scarcity*, i.e., when one strives and hopes for something that is perceived lacking (Maslow, 3/28/1970), which encompassed all stages on his Hierarchy of Needs minus the latter added self-transcendence.

Maslow’s private journals, where many of his ideas were first kneaded before formal presentation, provide valuable insight into his understanding of the plateau experience—a topic that garnered greater treatment than his other presentations (Cleary, 1996). They reveal pivotal correspondence with U. A. Asrani, an East Indian colleague from whom he adopted the term *plateau experience* almost three years before he first publicly presented it. Asrani’s influence coincided with the recognition by Maslow and other transpersonalists that integrating classical Asian psychology was desirable because they “appeared to represent an essential part of human nature that needed to be taken into account in any psychological theory attempting to delineate a model for the whole person” (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995, p.5).

## II. ASIAN IDEAS AND PHILOSOPHIES THAT INFLUENCED MASLOW’S PLATEAU THEORY

In an unpublished letter, dated May 5, 1967, to his colleague U. A. Asrani, Associate Professor Emeritus of Physics at Banares Hindu University, Maslow co-opted the term *plateau experience*:

I think your suggested term Plateau Experience is excellent and I shall use it henceforth to describe what I have been calling “serene B-cognition” [Being-cognition]. Apparently, this tends to come with aging or at least that is my experience. The acute and climactic peak experiences seem to lessen in number while the “awakened” cognition or unitive perceiving seems to increase and even come under voluntary control. The happiness then tends to be mild and constant rather than poignant and acute. (Maslow, cited in Heitzman, 2003, p. 34)

Asrani, in turn, credited Arthur Osborne (Asrani, 1969b), founding editor of *The Mountain Path* magazine, a quarterly publication of the Bhaghavan Sri Ramana Maharishi Center in southern India. An extensive search for mention of the plateau experience by Osborne, yielded only two results—one from a posthumously published autobiography (Osborne, 2001) and the other a series of letters to the editor in a now defunct newsletter of the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience, one of the first scientific societies investigating religious experience of interest to psychiatry (Bartocci, Rovera, Lalli, & Ascoli, 2006). According to Osborne,

The supreme experience is held in Hindu teaching to be neither spasmodic nor ecstatic but natural and continuous and should therefore not be characterised as a “peak” but as a lofty plateau ... This is *sahaja* or “*natural*” samadhi in which *full spiritual or transcendental consciousness co-exists with full outer awareness but free from ego-sense* ... the final state is ... “stabilization” and is beyond ecstasy ... pure, universal consciousness flows through a man, uses his faculties and performs the function which you ascribe to the ego, only much better. [italics added] (1966, pp.13–16)

Here we are provided with a clear definition [see italics] and name for the state—*sahaja samadhi*—as it is accorded in Hindu teachings. It is unknown whether Maslow ever read Osborne’s descriptions; however, from Osborne’s mention of the “peak” state it is likely he was familiar with Maslow’s work.

Osborne (1966) notes equivalents of the plateau state are found in Sufi teachings [“baqa”], Buddhism [“the Awakened”], and Christ’s teaching of “one who becomes like a little child (i.e., ego-free) can enter the kingdom of heaven” (Osborne, 1966, pp.13–16). This state is characterized by equipoise and mystical “‘sobriety’ in contrast to the ‘inebriation’ of ecstasy” (Osborne, 1966, p.15). He paints a rich mental image of the plateau experience, helping to clarify the original intent of the metaphor:

Imagine people living in a miasma at the foot of a mountain, stunted, undernourished, wasted by disease. They have been told that there is a wonderful plateau on the mountaintop, with fruit and flowers, invigorating air and cool, fresh water. But the ascent is arduous and they would have to leave their hovels and their few miserable possessions behind, or stay where they are. Only a few of the more enterprising, either seeking the mountain summit or simply striving to rise above the heat, miasma and mosquitos of the plain, have climbed up some distance and made themselves dwellings on the hillside. The plain-dwellers would refer to them all alike as ‘people of the hill’ and yet there would be endless differences among them. Some might have developed a farmstead and have fruit, milk and grain to give away to the sick and needy below, while others might be resting in a cave with a little more than their immediate needs. Some might have set forth on a deliberate enterprise to attain the summit, while others were driven merely by the urge to get up higher into cooler air and more beautiful health-giving surroundings, not even knowing that there was a summit to attain. Even among those who started out with a plan of ascent, some might have put it aside till a later, indefinite date, once they had made a home somewhere along the path, while others might regard each pleasure-grove they came to as no more than a resting place from which to plan the next stage of the ascent. (Osborne, 2001, pp.92–93)

In Osborne’s description, the plateau is portrayed as one choice among many of inhabiting and interacting with the metaphorical mountain—choices few accept despite the unpleasantness of the plain. He provided this image in an attempt to differentiate the terms *saint*, *mystic*, *initiate*, *yogi*, and *sage* (Osborne, 2001, p.92), using the mountain path as a representation for the

various means in which one can attain *Self-realization*, i.e., “complete dissolution of the mistaken belief that there ever was any other-than-Self in you” (Osborne, 2001, p.97). Crucially he states, in following the teachings of his guru Sri Bhagavan (commonly referred to as Ramana Maharishi), “there are no stages on this path” (Osborne, 2001, p.95), mirroring Maslow’s experience of the plateau as a constellation of extraordinary experiences (Heitzman, 2003). Osborne also asserts that although one may be blessed with “glimpses of pure Self-realization, beyond all states, which will suffuse and irradiate his whole life ... Realization is not normally permanent when first attained” (Osborne, 2001, p.95), a comment that shares likeness with Maslow’s observation that peak experiences are transient and plateau experiences require work to stabilize (Maslow, 1970). Osborne adds that “each aspirant will follow the path that accords with his temperament and that his destiny makes available” (Osborne, 2001, p.96).

Asrani, extending Osborne’s contributions, provides an academic exploration of the plateau experience from an Indian perspective (1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1977) grounded mostly in yogic philosophy and touching also on Buddhism. He came to the plateau experience in much the same way Maslow did, i.e., empirically, following a dangerous and emotionally challenging situation (as a political prisoner) (Asrani, 1977). He and Maslow shared details of their experiences in private correspondence and a face-to-face encounter (Cleary, 1996), which Maslow called “a very good coming together” (Maslow, 4/17/1969); Asrani considered Maslow one of several “to-note western psychologists” (Asrani, 1970, p.50). Asrani elaborated on Osborne’s description of the plateau state in various other traditions; “*Sthita Prajna* or *Jivan Mukta* by the Hindus, *Baqua* or *Haquiqat* by the Sufis, the *Bodhisatva* state by the Buddhists, the *Vita-Raga* state by the Jains, and the *Unitive* state by the Christians” (Asrani, 1969b, p.98). Like Osborne, he believed it was the true final goal of the mystic’s endeavors, boldly asserting this to be the consensus of mystics the world over with the exception of “the contrary opinion held by certain emotional mystics” (Asrani, 1969b, p.98).

Asrani claimed the plateau experience to be “a state of ideal or optimal mental health far superior to that of the normal mental health which is the goal of psychoanalysts” (Asrani, 1969b, p.99), echoed through Maslow’s metahuman concept. He states,

The *sahaja* state yields equanimity, a heightened frustration-tolerance and a sense of freedom; one begins to live in the present. It leads to concentration and efficiency in every activity, impartiality and freedom from bias in all judgments; elimination of all mental and emotional tensions; and an elimination of an over-concern with metaphysical questions. That state also enhances aesthetic appreciation and simplifies the pursuit of ethical values because of the unselfish detached attitude which is at the root of that state ... like the dynamic equilibrium of a man running stably on two bicycle wheels ... tak[ing] all the burdens of life on the wheeled vehicle of unselfishness. (Asrani, 1969b, p.99)

According to Cleary (1996), Asrani's descriptions of the plateau experience bear several characteristics that correspond with Maslow's report, including the post-mortem life, serenity, wise innocence, synergy, durability, Taoistic receptivity, and an ability to voluntarily enter the experience.

Although seldom cited by Maslow, influencing his articulation of the plateau experience was Taoism, especially the *Tao Te Ching* (Cleary, 1996)—a classic Chinese text believed to be written by Lao Tzu anywhere between the third and fifth century B.C.E (Chan, 2013). Characterizing Taoism as “an open-minded receptivity in understanding nature and the self” (Maslow, cited in Cleary, 1996, p.168), Maslow adopted and emphasized the concepts of spontaneity, receptive knowing, and flowing with life rather than acting against nature, including one's psychological nature (Cleary, 1996).

Although the peak and plateau experience both entail a subtle form of what Maslow termed Taoistic receptivity to one's surroundings, the range of receptivity in the two experiences differs—the plateau experience is receptive to the ordinary and common as well as the extraordinary and phenomenal ... and represents an awakening to what had always been there, readily available, but unnoticed or only half-noticed. (Cleary, 1996, pp.202–203)

Cleary (1996) recommends an inquiry into the relationships between the plateau experience and cognate concepts of consciousness in Asian psychologies, stressing the importance of better locating the plateau experience with the detailed maps of consciousness already available. He points out that Walsh and Vaughan (1993) have found descriptions of entire families of peak experiences, along with methods to induce them at will, and that Maslow's theory would have benefitted had he known more about ancient Asian wisdom and meditation texts (Cleary, 1996). Asrani (1970) agrees with the value of such an inquiry, particularly empirical contributions making use of the plethora of experience and knowledge in India:

A. H. Maslow has contributed valuable literature on an understanding of Jnana Yogic States. From purely observational data, he defines Self-Actualisers (those who actualise their potentialities) and a still higher class of people, whom he calls 'Transcenders' who not only have a taste of Peak Experiences, ecstasies, samadhies, etc., but actually live and feel like Jivana Mukta sages ... Maslow has done a lot to popularise the concept of the Jivana Mukta State (he calls it 'Transcendence', 'Theory Z' or 'Plateau State') from purely observational and empirical data. We here in India have a widely prevalent practice of Jnana Yoga, and probably much better living Jnana Yogic mystics. We can contribute deeper shades of this research and thus advance the scientific knowledge of the theory and practice of Jnana Yoga much further. (p.61)

To date, any comprehensive research specifically bridging the plateau experience with *jivana mukta*, *Jnana yoga*, the *sahaja* state or Taoism—and other equivalent states from any wisdom traditions from around the world for that matter—is yet to be written.

### III. LITERATURE ADDING TO OR REFINING THE PLATEAU THEORY

I now turn chronologically to other literature of significance on the plateau experience; namely, literature from theorists and researchers who have added to that expounded by Maslow (International Study Project, 1972; Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1979), Asrani (1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1977), and Osborne (1966, 2001). Due to the limited literature of substance available on the topic, as well as the intention to provide a more complete representation of the literature, the window of time has been broadened to include publications since Maslow's proposal of the plateau experience. Those citing the plateau experience but not adding to the theory are not included.

More than a decade after Maslow's passing, Keutzer (1982), a clinical psychologist collaborating with physics professor Amit Goswami to bring together quantum mechanics and psychology, wrote an article entitled *Physics and Consciousness*. In it, she links Maslow's transcendent plateau experience to "cosmic connection" (Keutzer, 1982, p.75), highlights parallels between this cosmic connection and physics, exposes resistances to a more general acceptance of this unifying state, and provides evidence suggesting, "we are in the midst of a paradigm shift, a transformation, a new metaphor that accepts the existence of this transpersonal consciousness" (Keutzer, 1982, p.77). She encourages another level of explanation, theory, and vision from the transpersonal movement, such as Maslow's, to help resolve the ontological problem this paradigm shift poses to "an inaccurate model of reality" (Keutzer, 1982, p.77).

Another decade later, in *The Higher Stages of Human Development: Perspectives on Adult Growth* (1990), a chapter is dedicated to the growth of higher stages of consciousness according to Maharishi's Vedic psychology of human development, explicating a "universally available sequence of 'higher stages of consciousness' that dramatically extends beyond the ordinarily understood endpoint of human development and ... the systematic means for their facilitation" (Alexander et al., 1990, p. 286). Without explicitly mentioning the plateau experience, they place Maslow amongst others (Cook-Greuter, 1990; Fowler, 1981; Kohlberg & Ryncarz, 1990; Koplowitz, 1984) in having posited a unified end state beyond abstract representational thought, which they equated with Maharishi's *unity consciousness*—a state (and the highest stage) where "all levels of mind and objective reality are experienced in terms of the Self" (Alexander et al., 1990, p.323). None of these theorists, they accord, have provided specific stages in the growth of that unification and hence, they "may have collapsed into one description several distinct levels of growth toward complete unification" (Alexander et al., 1990, p.323)—a claim that is valid in Maslow's case if the plateau experience does indeed prove to have stages.

Cleary and Shapiro (1995) were the first to truly revive Maslow's plateau theory, bringing it back to the appropriate attention of the transpersonal community with an article entitled, *The Plateau Experience and the Post-Mortem Life: Abraham. H. Maslow's Unfinished Theory*, in *The Journal of*

*Transpersonal Psychology*. A brief overview of Maslow's post-mortem period, how this prompted his plateau experience, the emergent themes at that time, and his shift from discussing peak experiences to plateau, is provided. They urge that the plateau experience holds interest as a topic in itself with possible contributions to better understanding transpersonal consciousness, development, and insight, as well as evolving transpersonal research (Cleary & Shapiro, 1995). Despite their enthusiasm, and Maslow's certainty that someone would continue his work to completion of "a system of human nature and society" (Maslow, cited in Cleary & Shapiro, 1995, p.21), few takers have stepped forth to carry the torch.

Cleary (1996) continued the expedition, giving a comprehensive treatment to the plateau theory, almost three decades after Maslow first publicly mentioned it. He gathered all existing writings by Maslow on the topic, including his personal journal entries, thus providing a complete summation of the experience. He included a thorough comparative analysis with Maslow's previous peak experience theory and his influence from Asian psychologies, though he evidences Maslow with first using the term *plateau experience*. Cleary astutely remarks that, "the greatest significance of Maslow's parting legacy may ultimately be not simply revealing another state of consciousness within the farther reaches of human nature, but of opening a door to openness—pointing the way toward the ceaseless manifestations of the farther reaches of human nature" (Cleary, 1996, p.209). He suggests fruitful further inquiries would be: (a) empirical research into whether or not the plateau experience may be elicited readily, as Maslow suggested, which would shed light on its commonality and/or universality as an experience, (b) more extensive investigation of the relationship between the plateau experience and cognate concepts of consciousness in Asian psychologies (as mentioned), (c) exploration as to whether elements of Maslow's experience were idiosyncratic, (d) examination of how long plateau experiences actually endure, whether they create lasting changes in consciousness, and if such changes remain undiminished over time, and (e) investigation of the relationship between death awareness and the transcendent, transpersonal, transhuman—a question Maslow himself raised (Cleary, 1996).

In his 1998 work, *The Essential Ken Wilber: An introductory reader*, Wilber—arguably one of the most prolific, influential, and controversial contributors to transpersonal psychological thought (Combs, 2013; MacDonald, 2007)—locates the plateau experience as one in a series of major phases we tend to traverse as we adapt to higher levels of our own spiritual nature. He lists as follows,

*belief* (magic, mythic, rational, holistic); *faith* (which is an intuition, but not yet a direct experience, of the higher realms); *peak experience* (of the psychic, subtle, casual, or nondual—in no particular order, because peak experiences are usually one-time hits); *plateau experience* (of the psychic, subtle, causal, and nondual—almost always in that order, because competence at one stage is required for the next); and *permanent adaptation* (to the psychic, subtle,

casual, and nondual, also in that order, for the same reason). (Wilber, 1998, p.181)

Like Maslow, Wilber understands the plateau experience to be a more permanent state of direct experience than the peaks, leading to eventual stabilization if one engages in prolonged practice. He calls this permanent adaptation or realization *One Taste*—“the purest Emptiness that is one with the entire world of Form” (Wilber, 1998, p.159). Without mention of or credit to Maslow or Asrani, Wilber associates the plateau experience with the *sahaja* state.

[P]lateau experiences, with further practice, can become permanent adaptations: constant access to psychic, subtle, casual, and nondual occasions—constant access to nature mysticism, deity mysticism, formless mysticism, and integral mysticism—all as easily available to consciousness as matter, body, and mind now are. And this is likewise evidenced in constant consciousness (*sahaja*) through all three states—waking, dreaming (or *savikalpa samadhi*), and sleeping (or *nirvikalpa samadhi*). (Wilber, 1998, p.181)

Wilber appears to agree with Maslow’s general postulation of a state called the plateau experience, albeit with subtle gradations, i.e., plateau *experiences*. In considering Wilber’s contribution, it is necessary to note the criticisms his synthesizing theory has drawn, namely that his perennial vision embraces vast amounts of complex information and attempts to place it into universal categories without empirical examination (Ferrer, 2002; Freidman, 2013).

In 2001, Heitzman undertook an in-depth analysis of the plateau experience with a thesis titled *The Plateau Experience and Narcissism: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Maslow’s Last Transpersonal Theory*. She furthered this work in 2003 with the dissertation, *The Plateau Experience in Context: An Intensive In-depth Psychobiographical Case Study of Abraham Maslow’s “Post-Mortem Life.”* The works collectively provide valuable insight into Maslow’s state of mind in the time surrounding and leading up to his conception of the plateau experience, further fleshing out key themes influencing his final years. Perhaps in response to Cleary’s (1996) recommendation for a further study into the idiosyncrasies of Maslow’s plateau experience, Heitzman explored Maslow’s lived experience, seeking connections between his intrapsychic processes, historical and environmental circumstances, and development of his last transpersonal theory. Ultimately, she concludes that Maslow cycled in and out of plateau experiences during the last fifteen months of his life, with ever increasing effect.

I believe Maslow realized that one door to transcendent experience was opened by going into and embracing everyday life, rather than attempting to elevate himself above it ... [He] truly yielded to an acceptance of life on its own terms and transcendence of his self-consciousness. (Heitzman, 2003, p.293)

Like a perspicacious psychotherapist, Heitzman carves through Maslow's psyche, providing a new contextual layer of insight into not just Maslow's plateau theory but also the man articulating it. Her recommendations (2003) for further investigation include (a) distinguishing Maslow's actual experiences from possible embellishment of those experiences, (b) a fine-combing of his journals to detect the frequency of themes regarding his concerns as he wrote about the plateau experience, and (c) further psychobiographical case studies of other individuals reporting similar experiences to better discern Maslow's idiosyncracies. She notes that her own and previous studies have barely scratched the surface of the plateau theory.

In 2003, Hamel, Leclerc, and LeFrançois (2003b) published research on *transcendent actualization* using an instrument the primary author developed several years earlier, called the Transcendent Actualization Inventory (Hamel, Leclerc, Lefrançois, & Gaulin, 2003a). Although not a direct measure of the plateau experience, transcendent actualization was introduced to psychology by Maslow (1971) to describe the final revised stage on his Hierarchy of Needs—a process where one's *metacognition* [unitive consciousness of beings and events] and *metamotivations* [unifying values of Being in daily life] are discovered and engaged, a process he believed was intrinsic to transcendence (Hamel et al., 2003b) and consequently, the plateau experience. In an exhaustive survey of all that has been published on transcendence in transpersonal psychology, Hamel et al. (2003b) used Maslow's two indicators of transcendence—metacognition and metamotivation—to analyze and organize the content. This resulted in a four-component classification illuminating how transcendent actualization may be realized. This is significant because although Maslow suspected the transcendent state of the plateau could be taught (Krippner, 1972), he stopped short at offering how this might actually unfold. The four components identified were (a) *in-depth perception*, i.e., the ability to discern and explore the aspects of one's life and life in general beyond appearances; (b) *holistic perception*, i.e., the ability to perceive one's life and life in general from a detached viewpoint; (c) *presence of being*, i.e., the ability of one's personality to live in harmony with the Self; and (d) *beyond ego-orientation*, i.e., the ability to leave one's personal preoccupations behind to focus on others, a mission, an altruistic goal (Hamel et al., 2003b). The development of such an instrument opens the door to research with direct implications for the plateau theory; namely, better understanding the various ways individuals “manifest their link with the Self” (Hamel et al., 2003b, p.14) and ultimately, vignettes into how people inhabit the plateau.

In another attempt to revivify Maslow's later work, Koltko-Rivera (2006) wrote an article highlighting the opportunities for theory, research, and unification within disciplinary psychology if Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs were to be corrected to reflect his later development of thought. He calls for a rewriting of psychology textbooks, which he claims have maintained an inaccurate version of Maslow's theory for several decades and cites the reasons why this problem persists. He injects fresh impetus into a much-needed amendment, one that would help the greater project of bringing Maslow's work on self-transcendence, including the plateau experience, to wider

attention. He stresses the gravity of understanding the shadow side of self-transcendence, specifically in light of increasing religious violence and terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and argues the need for confronting some of the less-developed areas of self-transcendent research. He avers that the much-needed correction to Maslow's theory—one that recognizes spirituality as a basic dimension of the human condition—would assist in a more culturally aware psychology. Citing Swartz's (1997) groundbreaking research that looked at motivationally distinct types of values from participants in more than twenty countries, and that found one of the top ten values was self-transcendence, Koltko-Rivera suggests Maslow's later work could provide a bridge between the cross-cultural values literature and a major theory of motivation. Extending this suggestion to a cross-cultural study on the plateau experience would undoubtedly be a valuable contribution, enhancing and deepening the observations made by Osborne (1966) and Asrani (1969b) that the plateau experience is reported in multiple wisdom traditions.

Hartman and Zimberoff (2008), in the article *Higher Stages of Human Development*, discuss what it takes to become “fully human” as Maslow termed it, making reference, like Koltko-Rivera (2006), to the necessity of considering Maslow's revised Hierarchy of Needs inclusive of self-transcendence. They emphasize the importance of *scaffolding*, i.e., practical actions that help support the core experience, in the effort to stabilize higher states of consciousness, including plateau experiences.

Peak experiences such as moments of insight or epiphany are often followed by plateaus. Such insights can fade quickly without the presence of a “scaffolding” for the learning process to assist with making meaning of the unfamiliar experience, such as: (1) having a language and cultural context for the experience; (2) having supportive like-minded community, including contact with more experienced practitioners (also necessary for ego development); (3) encountering or intentionally placing daily reminders of the experience in one's environment, which in NLP are called *anchors*; (4) continuing to access similar teachings; or (5) expressing the insight through art, writing or other action (using the sensual alpha brain wave state as a bridge from deep subliminal theta experience to everyday mind beta experience). (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2008, p.38)

These recommendations offer culturally and theologically neutral methods for optimal growth, helping to further bridge the gap in the transitions between self-transcending states. Hartman and Zimberoff also provide a list of nine common ingredients of higher stages of human development, which largely correspond with (and seem to be inspired by) characteristics Maslow identified in self-transcenders: resilience and serenity; increasing transcendence through humility; expanding perspective (visible and invisible worlds); mindfulness, presence, experiencing reality clearly; witness perspective and self-transcendence; high level of purpose or meaning in life; personal freedom; “Taoistic receptivity”; and increasing integration of brain functioning and nervous system-heart synchronicity.

More recently, a psychometric instrument to measure the plateau experience emerged—the PLEX (Plateau Experience measure)—created by Buckler, a professor of applied psychology and research methods. Buckler (2011) accents the difference between self-actualization (which he characterizes by peak experiences) versus self-transcendence (characterized by plateau experiences), likening peak experiences to Csikszentmihalyi’s popular *flow* concept (1996, 1997, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Like Maslow, Buckler warns against the over-emphasis and hedonistic pursuit of peak (and therefore flow) states, in which there is much current interest academically and popularly, notably in the burgeoning positive psychology movement, suggesting instead the pursuit of the plateau experience is a more appropriate and sound choice. He developed the PLEX based on a summary of what he identified as the key qualities through the literature he reviewed, the resultant subscales being serenity, mindfulness, and death anxiety. In terms of reliability and validity, the instrument was developed through a sample of 863 respondents with a very high reliability of between .816 to .873 and a three-week test-retest with high reliability of .773 (Buckler, 2011). It remains unused in further empirical research, and Buckler suggests a mixed-methods approach would complement the psychometric. Ultimately, he sees the plateau experience, and even just an awareness of it, as a means of bringing greater serenity and mindfulness to the “frenetic onslaught of daily life” (p.78).

#### IV. PLATEAU EXPERIENCE IN CORE TEXTS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the development of psychometric instruments, decades of literature (albeit limited and sporadic), the potential for future research into the realms of “the farther reaches of human nature” (Maslow, 1971), the cross-cultural invitations, and Maslow’s stature and legacy in psychology, it is remarkable there is not more interest in the plateau experience.

Recent authoritative texts including the *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (Paloutzain & Park, 2013) and *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality* (Miller, 2012)—key reference books for the transpersonal psychological sciences—make no mention of the plateau experience. The *SUNY Series in Transpersonal and Humanistic Psychology: Post-conventional Personality* (Pfaffenberger, Marko, & Combs, 2011) makes one brief mention of the plateau experience in the context of cosmic consciousness and the development of higher stages of self-actualization. The *Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology* (Freidman & Hartelius, 2013), considered the most comprehensive and up-to-date source on all matters pertaining to the field it represents, similarly makes only one mention of the plateau experience—a quote by Maslow in a chapter on psychedelics (Roberts & Winkelman, 2013).

Exploration of the plateau experience remains as open as the realms it inhabits. Several worthwhile future studies have already been posited and are yet to be entertained (Asrani, 1970; Buckler, 2011; Cleary, 1996; Hamel et al., 2003b; Heitzman, 2003; Koltko-Rivera, 2006). In addition to these, topics warranting

further inquiry include, but are in no ways limited to (a) personality development and its relevance in the plateau experience, i.e., different styles, approaches, and manifestations of metahumanness; (b) the plateau experience across different cultures and wisdom paths; (c) the relationship between the plateau state and altruism or service to a greater cause; (d) an investigation into metapathologies and their relation to the plateau state; (e) a weighing of the arguments that the plateau experience is a state or stage in a progression of consciousness versus the claim there are no stages; and (f) an exploration of how, if at all, the *participatory perspective* (Ferrer, 2002)—a relatively new and well received philosophical lens in transpersonal thought (Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013)—adds insight or enhances approaches to understanding the plateau theory.

### CONCLUSION

Were Maslow alive today, it is difficult to say in which direction he would have taken his “unfinished symphony” (Cleary, 1996, p.209) of the plateau experience and what impact a sustained focus may have had for inquiry, research, and application in the various branches of psychology and beyond. It is also interesting to ponder what he would have made of today’s world, its inhabitants, and our propensity (or lack thereof) for bringing about optimal wellbeing within our selves and for each other. One of Maslow’s greatest gifts for us is perhaps his unbounded optimism in humanity’s capacity to experience something extraordinary in the ordinariness of everyday life. His emphasis on honoring the natural processes of the human psyche and unfolding of life remain important reminders of how to be more fully human, foibles and all, in an ever-increasing synthetic and complex world.

The plateau experience remains a largely untapped resource of potential wealth—psychically, spiritually, and socially—for humanity today. As outlined, it speaks to a state that has been recognized and mapped by well-respected wisdom traditions and ancient philosophies; the “plateau experience” simply serves as yet another name, a metaphor, for an experience it seems we humans have been having for some time. Maslow’s encounter with the experience is significant to any field concerned with the farther reaches of human nature as it appears to be his best way of articulating a significant evolution in his existing conception and perception of what it is to be human—one that offers an insightful and promising window to the sacred, the mysterious, the miraculous, and the very real.

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