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## When a Virgin is not a Virgin

Tina Lindhard

International University of Professional Studies (IUPS),

### ABSTRACT

My fascination with the *Pythia* began several years ago when I was writing a paper on different ways of knowing. Although the *Pythia* is surrounded in myth and has been written about by numerous authors both in the past and present, it seems to me she still has a story to tell which has not been touched on before. The *Pythia* was the priestess at Delphi and among other things, she had to be a virgin (*pathenos*), or at least originally. We also know that inscribed on the forecourt temple of Apollo was the maxim "Know Thyself". When we put these aspects together with the non-denominational method of meditation used by early cults in the Mediterranean area and other parts of the world known as Prayer of the Heart, a different meaning of the word *virgin* starts to reveal itself. This also suggests that these priestesses might have been mystics trained in an esoteric tradition, which leads to Self-discovery or the Godliness of humans.

**Keywords:** Pythia; Delphi; Ancient Greece; virgin; Know Thyself; Prayer of the Heart; intuition; female principle

### INTRODUCTION

*The oracle neither conceals, nor reveals, but indicates.*  
(Heraclitus, in [1, p. 9]).

My fascination with the *Pythia* began several years ago when I was writing a paper on different ways of knowing. *The Pythia* was who pronounced the oracle at Delphi and among other things, she had to be a "young virgin" (*pathenos*), or at least this was said to be the case originally [1]. Actually the term *Pythia* does not apply to one woman, but a "sisterhood of mystics" [2, Prologue] and it was these women who were the pronouncers of oracles in the name of Apollo who made Delphi famous.

In the account I relate here it is difficult to discern between fact and fiction and probably we never will, because it also depends on who is telling the tale and what aspects of it they want to highlight. Nevertheless, reading between the lines, slowly a picture starts to emerge. In this article, among other things, I share some of the myths and stories surrounding Delphi and its history, Apollo, the *Pythia* and her history, the object of heart based-spiritual meditation practices, their relationship to *virginity* and their connection with the maxim *Know Thyself*.

### DELPHI

Although the place is shrouded in mystery, Delphi too has a tale to tell. Early myths indicate that the site was also a place of prophesy in pre-classical times when it was a "mystical sibyl who presided in Delphi. Her title, 'Sibyl', means prophetess or 'one who sees', and comes from the Greek word *sibylla*" [3, p. 30].]. The sibyls were considered to have been born between man (humans) and the goddess, and therefore be semi-Divine. They were found throughout Greece and known for their prophetic insights [3]. Michelangelo included the sibyl in his painting on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel as the figure who pronounced the coming of Christ.

Originally, Delphi was connected with the Earth goddess or Gaia and the place was known as Pytho, which was named after the great serpent who guarded it. In goddess worship the python was the symbol of rebirth and regeneration and was considered the son of Gaia. Broad [in 3] maintains the Mycenaeans settled in the Delphi area on Mount Parnassos and cared for the shrine for more than five hundred years. Gaia along with other goddesses such as Themis, Aphrodite, Artemis, Leto, Pandora, Selene, Hera, Athena, Demeter, Persephone, and Rhea were highly revered in the pre-Olympian era and were associated with "order, wisdom, protection, and the life-giving processes of fertility, which were intimately tied to seasonal changes" [3, p. 30]. In a time line of Delphi, worship of Gaia at Delphi seems to have taken place between 1700-1400 BC [4] but this could be later as the *New World Encyclopedia* [5] gives the Mycenaean period as lasting between 1600-1100 BC. The goddess tradition was oral and when it was replaced by invading patriarchal societies, the myths got wiped out or retold and transformed to suit the new tradition. The name *Delphoi* comes from the same root as *δελφύς delphys*, meaning "womb" [6].

### APOLLO

In places like Delphi, the divine source of prophecy, inspiration and knowledge also changed with each invasion. In Delphi the masculine Olympian God Apollo replaced the earth Goddess and the semi-divine priestesses were also replaced by human oracles who became known as the *Pythia*, which comes from the Greek word *pythein* meaning "to rot". This referred to "the stench from the body of the Python, which arose from the fissure Apollo had thrown the slain serpent into" [3, p. 33]. Prior to Apollo becoming associated with Delphi, Themis, the daughter of Gaia, was said to take over from her mother and deliver oracles there. Later Phoebe, her sister, took over peacefully from Themis, both being Titans (Aeschylus in [7, para. 4]).

Apollo was patron of Delphi. He was the oracular god through which the *Pythias* uttered their prophecies. In art, he was represented as the ideal of a *kouros*, a beardless, athletic youth who was either naked or robed. His character was dual in nature for he could bring death, terror, and awe with his symbolic bow and on the other hand, transport one to the joy of communion with Olympus (the home of the gods) through poetry, dance and music, the lyre being the instrument with which he was most associated [8]. Apollo is connected with the Delphi by his epithet *Δελφίνιος Delphinios*, "the Delphinian" which in turn is connected with dolphins. The word dolphin comes from the Greek word *δελφίς (delphís)*, which is related to the Greek *δελφύς (delphus)* meaning "womb" [9]. The first priests Apollo was said to have appointed, were sailors coming from Crete [10].

### CONDITIONS OF WOMEN DURING THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

Here I take the classical period to be a "conventional shorthand for the history and culture dominated by Greek and Roman influences for a couple of thousand years. It's an arbitrary division of world culture, and further complicated by our current popular inability to disentangle Greek from Roman, much less Carthaginian, Parthian, or Celtic strains" [11, para.7]. At that time, in public discourse in Greece a woman had no voice of her own for she was supposed to be silent and thus in politics and power lacked any right to be heard [12, p. 27]. However both in ancient Greece and Rome, side by side with the philosophic and mathematical way of knowing as expounded by Pythagoras, we find places where women as a "sisterhood of mystics" [2, Prologue] were the pronouncers of oracles. Ironically, therefore, the greatest authority of ancient Greece was a woman [2, chap. 1] and the most famous site was Delphi.

## HISTORY OF DELPHI

The use of the site at Delphi probably goes back to about 1,400 BC or even earlier and later fell into disuse until, during the classical period, the followers of Apollo adopted it again [6]. The sanctuary under Apollo was active from late eighth century BC to fourth century AD - a history that lasted over one thousand years [1]. The Christian emperor Theodosius I finally silenced the oracle in 392 AD when he ordered pagan temples to cease operation thus prohibited the cult of Apollo and the celebration of the Pythian games in honor of Apollo [13]. The vast temple was officially closed in 393 AD.

## THE PYTHIA

The story goes that Zeus sought to find the center of his "Grandmother Earth" or Gaia. He therefore sent two eagles flying from the eastern and western extremities, and the path where the eagles crossed was considered the *omphalus* or navel of Gaia [14]. Apollo, in order bring in a new tradition to this site, is said to have slain the python, the great she dragon that protected the earth's navel [15]. As described earlier, during Apollo's *reign*, the priestess or virgin was known as the *Pythia*.

It is difficult to know exactly the questions given to the *Pythia* and the responses she gave as reports of these often occurred long after the utterances took place. In addition some of the reports come from people "hostile to pagan religious practices such as the Christian writer Eusebius" [1, p. 11]. Often writers used the story to illustrate their own narrative, and in this sense they were not exact. For this reason Park and Wormell [16] maintain that there is no oracle to which one can point with absolute confidence in its historical authenticity. We also do not have a straightforward account about how a consultation with the oracle at Delphi took place. Sources that do discuss these topics date from Roman times (first Century BC to fourth century AD) when the shrine was already past its heyday. References from the classical period treat the process as common knowledge and Delphi was often used as a short hand for what happened in other oracular sanctuaries [1].

The *Pythia* or virgin was said to sit at the opening of the cave on a small stool, which was perforated with small holes. She kept her legs wide apart and maybe this was to allow the fumes from the cavern below to enter her womb. As we have seen the etymology of the word Delphi comes from the word meaning "womb". And here we must stop to investigate the meaning of the word *virgin* and also what the *virgin* was said to be doing or from where the wisdom she was pronouncing was said to be coming. In the case of the *Pythia*, virginity, according to Beard [12] "ensured her openness to Apollo, and (like a perfect bride) to him alone" (p. 31). In reviewing Sissa's book, Beard [12] points out that

*there is more here than strange notions of female physiology... and that the role of the Pythia highlights an inextricable connection between the 'woman's voice' and sexuality, between 'the mouth that speaks and eats' and the 'mouth' of the vagina. Sissa's book is a subtle exploration of the woman's body as a vehicle not just of divine prophecy but also of human speech (p. 31).*

Beard [12] feels later that she might have overplayed or "been too enthusiastic about the different mouths of the Delphic priestess" (p. 285). I too feel that this is just one of the possible levels of meaning but that there are many others that also need investigating, especially if we are to understand how the *Pythia* indirectly or even directly affected European history over the next 2,000 years, including science, the nature of reality and different ways of knowing. Certainly 'her voice' or the voice of the *Pythia* was heard all over the Greek colonies of the Mediterranean and her role as a social catalyst was as acclaimed as the hidden wisdoms she expounded [2, Prologue].

According to Beard [12] the *Pythia* needed to be somebody with the vaginal tract open. This to me suggests that the use of the word *virgin* does not depend on whether the *Pythia* was sexually chaste or not. This is consistent with the records that indicated the women chosen needed to be from Delphi, of sober and good character and could be married although on assuming the role of the *Pythia*, her marital responsibilities stopped [16]. Plutarch, who served as a priest during the late first century and early second century CE, maintained that in previous centuries, there had been three *Pythias*, two regular and one understudy. She committed herself to strenuous exercise and chastity and she wore the dress of the original virgin (Plutarch in [1]). The story goes that Echerates of Thessaly fell in love with an early *Pythia* and carried her off and raped her - hence the Delphians agreed that the future *Pythias* be 50 years or older but the *Pythia* should continue to wear the dress of a maiden in memory of the original virgin prophetess. The women could have been wives and mothers but they withdrew themselves from these roles to perform the role of the *Pythia* [1, p. 13]. According to Plutarch in his day the woman chosen was from the soundest and most respected families but not necessarily the noblest and could come from a poor peasant home as long as she had lived an irreproachable life (in [1]. According to him, the *Pythia* fulfilled her prophetic task "artlessly and without special knowledge or talent" (Plutarch in [1, p.11]) Once chosen the role of the *Pythia* was for life. There seems to be some controversy whether the oracle of Delphi actually predicted the future or just gave guarded advice. The cryptic answers to questions seem to support the latter, but more scholarly research is needed to confirm this.

The *Pythia* was available for prophecy one day a month for nine months for the year, starting when the weather got warmer in spring. She therefore worked nine days a year. No women except the *Pythia* were allowed into the innermost part of the temple, but there were women who kept the sacred fire of laurel wood going on the inner sacred hearth [1, p. 18]. It is unclear the role the priests played and whether they interpreted what she said. It is also not clear where the person who asked the question was positioned or whether it was in writing. There are also discrepancies in how she responded with some writers claiming she entered into a frenzy through the inhalation of vapor and as a result raved which the priests then interpreted [17], whereas others claimed that she responded in a normal voice [1; 6]. This view of a mad *Pythia* is mainly from late Roman and anti-pagan sources [1]. Often the temples of Apollo were situated on geographical faults and this was no exception [12]. In modern times, investigations have revealed that two faults intersect directly below the Delphic temple. "The study also found evidence of hallucinogenic gases rising from a nearby spring and preserved within the temple rock" [18]. This implies that the trance like state of the *Pythia* might have been drug induced.

### THE TEMPLE

The temple itself was a vast complex situated on the southern slopes of Mt. Parnassos. The temple to Apollo was built three times. The ruins we can see today date back to the 4th Century BC. These buildings replaced those built in the 6th Century BC that had been destroyed in an earthquake. These in turn replaced the original temple built to Apollo in the 7th Century BC, which was destroyed by fire. The temple sanctuary was large and was roughly rectangular in shape. "A sacred way lined with Monuments and treasuries wound up through the sanctuary to the Temple of Apollo itself, which housed the Delphic oracle in a chamber at the rear" [19]. Delphi was taken over by the Romans in the early 2nd century BC.

### KNOW THYSELF

From Pausanias, we know that the famous maxim *Know Thyself* was inscribed on the forecourt temple of Apollo [20]. This saying is similar to a saying that is found in the Luxor Temple in Egypt- "Man, know thyself, and you are going to know the gods" [21]. The topic of

the Self is also addressed in the Katha Upanishad, India. Although there is disagreement about its date, Philips [22] maintains this Upanishad was probably written in the first part of first millennium BC. However, Indian philosophy was an oral tradition, which was passed down from generation to generation, hence its origin could be much older.

In this Upanishad the story is about Yama (or Death) teaching a young and curious boy called Nachiketa about the mysteries of the Self.

*He (the Atman) difficult to be seen, full of mystery,  
The ancient, primaeval one, concealed deep within,  
He who, by yoga means of meditation on his self, comprehends Atman in him as God.  
He leaves joy and sorrow far behind. [23, 1.2.1.2.]*

Atman here refers to Soul or Self and yoga is meditation on one's Self. In the Bhagavad Gita it says: "Let a man lift himself by his own Self alone; let him not lower himself, for this self alone is the friend of oneself and this self alone is the enemy of oneself. The self is the friend of the self for him who has conquered himself by the Self, but to the unconquered self, this self stands in the position of an enemy like the (external) foe " [24, VI, 5-6].

### **PRAYER OF THE HEART (PH)**

Heart-based meditation practices are about finding our origin in and beyond our hearts. The oldest known method is Prayer of the Heart (PH) and historically it has been practiced in some form or another by many cultures such as the Hermetic mysteries, the God-man in early Egypt, visions of God in ancient Judaism and early cults in the Mediterranean area. The practice in India of *atma-vichara* (enquiry into our Self or true nature) is related to this, as are the Tantrik practices of *Sri Yantra*. In Sufism the practice is known as *dhikr*, is related to devotional frenzy through the use of Divine Names. Prayer of the Heart, an early Christian mystical method, is part of the Hesychasm (from the Greek word *Hesychia* meaning inner stillness) and was later absorbed by the Orthodox Church [25].

Although the meditation method known as mindfulness has been researched extensively, not much is known about heart-based somatic focusing practices like Prayer of the Heart (Louchakova & Warner as cited in [26, p. 84]). It "is dual and non-dual, a process of self-enquiry and worship, a particular spiritual practice and a whole wisdom tradition wrapped up in one" [25, p. 35]. "Affectively in the Spiritual Heart the inward flow of intentional consciousness, attempting to grasp its own origin, is stabilized in the experience of internal intimacy" [26, p. 91]. "Sanatana dharma, the spiritual philosophy of India, suggests there is a perennial form of healing, which consists in the realization of the true, immortal and limitless nature of the Self beyond the ego" (Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, as cited in [26, p. 81]).

### **PRAYER OF THE HEART, THE PYTHIA AND KNOW THYSELF**

According to Louchakova [25] "Prayer of the Heart is the core of the best-kept secrets of western esotericism" (p.35). Bearing in mind the comments on Know Thyself presented earlier, I suggest here that the Sibyls and the *Pythias* might have practiced PH or a method similar to this.

I therefore present various aspects of PH and other heart-based practices, which seem to suggest that this hypothesis might at least be plausible.

- Prayer of the Heart is "a non-denominational practice . . . and can be used by seekers of any orientation" [25, p. 35]. In a nutshell, the repetition of Divine Names and the focusing of one's attention on the heart during the practice of PH, gives rise to the "direct intuition of the self " [25, p. 36]. This means that each tradition and/ or each

person can use the name of God with which they most resonate. It also means that, even when there was a change in the divine source of prophecy with each invasion, the method could still be practiced even though the name of God or the Divine Source might be perceived as being different.

- In the modern day heart-based method known as Intuitive Meditation, a vibratory sound is coupled with the breath and touch and slowly the practitioner open to his or her inner world via the heart. It involves a process of Self-discovery, which the philosopher Arka describes as a journey from the rational mind, to the emotional heart to pure consciousness [27, p. 38]. As one begins to connect with one's deeper self or soul, one's intuitive faculties open [28; 29] and one feels guided in what one knows, says and does. When the practitioner starts to surrender to this guiding force, one realizes that one's ego identity is not the doer and the more one surrenders to this intuitive guidance, the more this level of knowing increases [31]. I feel that it was from this level of knowing that the *sibyls* and the *Pythia* spoke. This does not necessarily mean that every woman who became the *Pythia*, was completely realized being, but that their level of psychic proficiency was great enough to fill the post.
- Louchakova [26] maintains that the core of practices associated with ego transcendence and contemplation of the Self is the "experimental phenomenological introspection into the living topological construct of the Self " [26. p. 82]. Meanwhile for Arka [27], the term meditation entails "serious self-pondering [which involves] the process of making profound inquiry into the depth of the soul about . . . [our] existence or how the Universe was created or the laws that governed living and non-living matter" [27, p. 29]. Arka [27] also suggests that during the process of self-inquiry we are rewinding our surface consciousness in an endeavor to personally "reverse the evolution of all that has happened to us from the time of our birth to the present" so we can re-experience the purity of our consciousness. Talking about the different levels the practitioner undergoes on this journey, Arka claims that the further one descends from the surface mind the experiences "become increasingly metaphysical and even mystical" [26, p.38]. Based on van der Wal's " [30] work concerning embryology, Lindhard [29; 31] pushes back the search for the self to the incarnation of the living being in the womb.
- This seems to resonate with the path as described by Lao Tzu. Stenudd [32], in his comment on chapter 6 of the *Tao Te Ching*, feels that Lao Tzu "allows himself some play with words" (para 1).

As Stenudd's [32] translation and comment on the text is so important to this topic, I include both below

*"The valley spirit never dies.  
It is called the mystical female.  
The entrance to the mystical female  
Is called the root of Heaven and Earth.  
Though gossamer,  
As if barely existing,  
It is used but never spent"* (Lao Tzu, Chap 6 translated [32]).

... The Chinese word for valley, *ku*, can be translated gorge, and the word for female (of any species) also refers to a deep gorge. The word for mystical, *hsüan*, can be translated dark or deep. So, Lao Tzu describes a dark depth, from the entrance of which the whole world springs, like a child does from its mother's womb.

The sign for entrance, also meaning gate or door, shows a swinging door, just like the one to the saloon in every Western movie. In the context of this chapter, it's an image also suggesting the gate to a woman's womb, which is certainly a birthplace of tremendous significance.

To Lao Tzu, the origin of the world is female, like a mother of any species. Heaven and Earth are rooted at the entrance to this womb, but there is a vast depth beneath the entrance, from which so much more can emerge. This mother of all is endlessly fertile. She never ceases to breed and nurture.

This mystical female is Tao, the Way. Again an intriguing imagery. The way to this primordial female leads into the dark gorge.

Tao as a mother of all, like the Greek Earth goddess Gaia, is a returning theme in the *Tao Te Ching*. Although ancient China was indeed a patriarchal society, Lao Tzu praised the traditionally female qualities repeatedly. Since the nature of Tao resembles the female much more than the male, so should people behave. Giving instead of taking, humble instead of proud, yielding instead of forcing, and so on.

This preference must have been very radical in the days of Lao Tzu. Actually, it still is.

In the last line of this chapter, Lao Tzu leaves the metaphor of the womb, although he still talks about Tao. He moves on to another aspect of it, another way of looking at it. The essence of the Way is as vague and fine as cobweb, because it's a principle, a natural law, with no substance of its own. That's why it lasts, no matter how much it is used. Like a formula. [32].

Anderson [33], in her translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, feels these poems "emphasize the feminine mysteries and esoteric elements" which were prevalent around the 11<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. In agreement with other scholars, she feels that the oral tradition on which these poems are based, come from that era. In her translation of the above verse, she directly names the womb, by saying:

*"The immortal void is called the dark womb, the dark womb's gate. From her, Creation takes root" [33, Abstract].*

In both these translations and reflections, it seems that the female principle is the key to the deeper layers and like the oracle it is a principle that "neither conceals, nor reveals, but indicates" (Heraclitus, in [1, p. 9]. This is consistent with Arka's Theory of the Six Main Levels of Consciousness, where the consciousness associated with heart is seen as being related to a faculty based on feeling, intuition and a way of knowing with which mothers have "naturally available and readily accessible to them" [27, p. 37]. Although Arka identifies the main layers one goes through when one follows the heart-based Intuitive Meditation method, his approach to meditation is not as specific as PH, but he leaves each practitioner to find his or her own way and be guided from the inside by his or her self or soul which the practitioner slowly discovers as he or she progresses. Although one's intuitive abilities are slowly awakened as one descends, the fifth level Arka " [27] mentions in his theory, which he call s "Heart-Soul Consciousness", is when "the laws of physics start reversing and lead you to experience many alternative realities" (p. 38). This is probably when one's psychic abilities are really enhanced.

### MEANING OF THE WORD VIRGIN

According to Beard [12] Christian writers scorned the way the *Pythia* sat, "astride a tripod, legs apart, taking up the vapours of his prophetic spirit into her vagina. But that was precisely the point: the body of the *Pythia* was open to the word of god" (p. 31). This is for me a symbolic

representation, for if the *Pythia* was a true mystic, she needed neither the tripod to sit on nor the vapors of the world below, but certainly the gasses that escaped from the earth might have helped in inducing the trance state from which she spoke. After the alleged rape of an earlier virgin *Pythia*, Delphians were said to agree that future *Pythias* could be married, have had children and be 50 years or older. These later *Pythias* were then dressed in virgin's clothes. These statements seem to point to some sort of mystery behind the word *virgin* that might be obvious to some but not so obvious to the uninitiated.

In the dictionary we find several meanings for the Greek word *parthénos*/virgin which need considering:

1. young, unmarried woman; maiden
2. virgin
3. pupil
4. epithet of various goddesses most commonly of Athena. [34]

Although in the case of the *Pythia*, all four descriptions could possibly fit some of the *Pythias*, later *Pythia* needed neither to be young nor sexually chaste. However, as I have suggested, it is possible that the *Pythia* might have been a pupil of a perennial type of mystical tradition, which leads to self-discovery or the Godliness of humans. With this possibility in mind, I discuss some of the possible meanings of the word virgin in connection with the path of self-discovery. This will also clarify the last meaning as virgin as an epithet for various goddesses.

- In pre *Pythia* times when the primeval source of all creation was conceived of as female, the attributes of a woman who arrived at mystical union would be associated with the *Goddess* and have her attributes. In matriarchal societies "Gaia was considered the Primeval Prophetess, the Greek great earth mother" (Aeschylus in [35]). There are two versions of Classical creation myth, Hesiod's and Ovid's. However in both versions Gaia emerges out of Chaos and has a parthenogenetic birth [35]. "The word *parthenogenesis* comes from the Greek *parthenos*, 'virgin' more or less, and *gignesthai*, 'to be born.' It means, essentially, to be born of a virgin—that is, without the participation of a male. For a goddess to be 'parthenogenetic' thus means that she stands as a primordial creatrix, who requires no male partner to produce the cosmos, earth, life, matter and even other gods out of her own essence" [36, p. 1]. Where Gaia was worshiped, on esoteric union the worshiper would be seen as taking on her attributes and in this sense, she too would be considered as a virgin or parthenogenetic. As the Python was seen as the son of Gaia, it is possible that during this era, the esoteric pathway was a *kundalini*-based process where energy is seen as rising up the spine opening the various energetic centers or chakras [37].
- In the time of the *Pythia*, thoughts regarding cosmology had become more complex and a whole pantheon of gods had come into being with Zeus being considered the king of Gods who ruled from Mount Olympus. Whereas the female had previously been conceived of as the primordial creatrix, we find a turn about as depicted by the very unusual birth of Athena. Zeus fearing that his wife Metis would give birth to a son who would be greater than him, swallowed her after she had conveniently turned into a fly. However Metis was already pregnant with Athena, who on being born then miraculously came into being through an opening in the head of Zeus. She was fully grown ready to take up her task as goddess of war. Although there are other stories surrounding her birth, she did not have a real mother in any of them [38]. According to Harrison [39], Athena's birth can be considered as a desperate theological expedient to rid Athena of matriarchal conditions. By having her born from Zeus, it gave males authority and power over something that had previously only been a female realm [38]. Sometimes Athena is known as Pallas Athena, which refers to her condition as a virgin.

She was also known as the goddess of wisdom and of essential knowing and logic. She was the guardian of cities and Athens is named after her. Although she was the goddess of war, this was more about good tactics and winning strategies, not just fighting, like Ares [38]. This aspect of good tactics, as a strategy, can also be applied when acquiring inner wisdom. Unlike the other gods, Athena was a virgin who did not like or participate in sexual intercourse. As an esoteric figure, it is possible she represents the need to bring the masculine logical side together with female creative wisdom, but not through sexual union. On an esoteric level Athena can therefore be seen as heralding a new path of finding union, one that is thinking based rather than emotionally based. This is consistent with divisions between meditation method, which are either thinking or feeling based (Arka in [31]). Athena was twice born, the first time she was born of Metis in Zeus, and the second time she was born or came into being 'fully-grown' through Zeus' head. For this path virginity referring to sexual chasteness seems to be a requirement.

- The path of Athena seems to lack the emotional aspect, which is prevalent in some esoteric traditions. On the other hand, the emotional aspect can be seen in the *Pythia's* relationship with the masculine Apollo, who then spoke through her. This relationship can be seen as somewhat similar to the *Bhakti* tradition of India. The *Bhakti* tradition is mentioned in Indian texts such the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, the Katha Upanishad and the Bhagavad Gita, which are dated from the 1st millennium BC [40]. It involves devotion to, and love for, a personal god or a representational god by a devotee and it is one of the paths that is said to lead to liberation or moksha [41].
- As an adjective *parthénos* "means pure, unadulterated" [34]. In its more modern meaning when referring to vegetable oil, "virgin oil is obtained from the first pressing" [42]. Based on Arka's [27] suggestion that during the process of self-inquiry we are rewinding our surface consciousness in an endeavor to personally "reverse the evolution of all that has happened to us" (p.38), the practitioner who completes the journey can be considered as a person who is pure and unadulterated. From this perspective the *Pythia* can be considered as a woman through whom the message of the god came directly or freshly, from the "first pressing" and not altered by human activity or ego. So in this sense she was *parthenos*, a virgin and a vehicle for the word of god regardless if she was sexually chaste or not.

### FINAL INSIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

The story of Delphi reveals itself slowly. The word 'virgin', as we have seen, has many meanings. Also it also seems as though more than the oracle was pronounced in Delphi. On a subtle level it seems as though the site also represents the cosmology of the time and of time itself as well as the nature of reality. The name Delphi, which comes from the same root as womb, can be seen as representing the mystical female, where new life, like the oracle, is unceasingly generated.

It is probable that as humans began to understand more about the human reproductive process including the role of the male in generating children, a new way forward was invented to take over from the old parthenogenetic matriarchal myth. At first I found it strange that on the one hand Apollo killed the Python, and yet it was still a virgin who pronounced the oracle. However this seems to reflect a shift in the importance of women from being the vessel of the goddess within her to being a vessel or virgin through whom a god could speak. This was accompanied by a shift from a matriarchal to patriarchal society where the male wanted to know whether the children were his or not. This involved a whole new political and economic system, which centered round the chasteness and sexual virginity of women. However in the esoteric sense, as a lover of her deeper Self or essence, the woman did not have to be a virgin,

but through the process of Self discovery which includes humbling the ego, she regained her 'virginity' or purity. This in turn enabled her to speak in the name of God or Higher Nature [43]. Of course I cannot prove that the thread underlying the meaning of virgin included an esoteric tradition where women were searching for their true self, I can only suggest that it might have been so. In this sense, the term virgin could also apply to a man who has undertaken the inner path of self-inquiry.

Oracles and myths try to make sense of our knowledge about reality. They tell stories that probably made sense to the people of the time, but they also often seem to introduce new ways of understanding reality. Delphi seems to have played a leading role in this endeavor. Delphi, 'the womb', was the center of the world where another way of knowing was acclaimed and recognized throughout the Hellenic empire. Whether the *Pythia* practiced an esoteric pathway or not, her gift as the pronouncer of the oracle or what we can call clarity of vision or intuition was held in tremendous esteem not only by the public but also by the philosophers of the time. Certainly all paid homage to her. It is also important to realize that Delphi also represents both outer cosmic forces and inner psychic forces. As a psychic force, in paying homage to the *Pythia* in the world outside, the inner intuitive capacities were also recognized and held in the highest esteem. Talking of the "virgin", Woodman and Dickenson [44] describe her as being

*like the virgin forest, she is full of her own life force, full of potential, and pregnant...she guides and advises and acts with absolute clarity, often with a startling sense of humor that delights in play. She is blunt, neither compassionate nor sentimental. She demands embodiment. Living in the creative intercourse between chaos and order, she calls us into the dance of creation, her love in her living body. She speaks to men as clearly as to women. (p. 2)*

In spite of women not having any power in public discourse in classical times in Greece, it seems as though both male and female ways of knowing lived side by side where each gave 'life as creativity' to the other. In this sense the inherent sexuality of the Universe was recognized. 'Intercourse' as understood via its etymological meaning as 'communion to and fro' or a 'running between' of energy between two entities, not only took place, but also was acknowledged, although maybe not quite in these terms.

As we have seen, "the body of the *Pythia* was open to the word of god" [12, p. 31]. In pronouncing the oracle in the name of "god", she was bowing to the transcendent nature of the universe or Self and hence the maxim of Delphi, "Know your Self" was also being honored.

Curiously, groups of Visigoths sacked Rome in 410 AD, not 20 years after the Christian emperor Theodosius silenced the oracle in 392 AD. In 455 AD, Rome was sacked again, but by the Vandals. With the fall of Rome, the Goths and Visigoths of the north over ran Southern Europe leading to a period known as the "dark ages" (also known as the Early Middle Age) for it was characterized by intellectual darkness and economic regression [45]. And thus ended an era, which at its height had extended way beyond its original base in the Mediterranean.

With the silencing of the oracle, the female way of knowing was also silenced. Europe's turbulent history during the Inquisition is a sad testimony to how *women's way of knowing* was also silenced. The 30-year war, which took place between 1618-1648, was largely fought on German soil. It is considered one of the most destructive wars in European history and one of the longest wars in modern history. Although initially the war was religious involving Catholic and Protestant states, it also coincided with the rise to a new economic system. The war roughly coincided with the peak of the burning of women or "witch hunts" which started during the late medieval period and peaked between 1580 and 1630 [46]. Women seemed to

have been 'caught' in the cross fire, for although many of them were humble peasants, they possessed natural knowledge of healing, herbs and midwifery that had been passed down from generation to generation.

Today, in spite of much scientific research demonstrating the existence of intuitive and psychic abilities, this way of knowing is still not fully recognized with much work in this field being known as 'pseudo science'. In commenting on her work done in parapsychology (scientific investigation of potential skills that are commonly known as psychic abilities, such as precognition, telepathy, and so on), Utts [47] maintains that she has observed very careful work done in this field which also includes classified work undertaken by the United States government during the cold war to see the use of these abilities for intelligence gathering. At the end of the project she wrote a report to congress reflecting what she felt and still feels is true. I include it below:

*The data in support of precognition and possibly other related phenomena are quite strong statistically, and would be widely accepted if they pertained to something more mundane. Yet, most scientists reject the possible reality of these abilities without ever looking at data! And on the other extreme, there are true believers who base their belief solely on anecdotes and personal experience. I have asked the debunkers if there is any amount of data that could convince them, and they generally have responded by saying, "probably not." I ask them what original research they have read, and they mostly admit that they haven't read any! Now there is a definition of pseudo-science— basing conclusions on belief, rather than data! [47, Data Beat Anecdotes, para. 4]*

The Universe can be seen as the eternal and infinite womb that contains all the forms of life that have been, that are and that will be, the womb from which new life is unceasingly and eternally generated. To understand this Universe, science, as it exists today, will not get us there. Science up to now 'has ridden' on one limb, a masculine rational way of seeing the Universe. It has given rise to many new technologies, which at the same time, has created a way of living on this planet that is not sustainable.

*When the divine feminine, the goddess, is no longer revered, social and psychic structures become over mechanized, over politicized, over militarized. Thinking, judgment and rationality become the ruling factors. The need for relatedness, feeling, caring or attending to nature goes unheeded - there is no balance, no harmony, neither within oneself nor in the external world. With disregard to the archetypal image so related to passionate love, a splitting off of values, a one sidedness occurs in the psyche. As a result, we are sadly crippled in our search for wholeness and health. [48, p.16]*

What we need today is a new way forward, which includes the female principle, a mystical path, which includes both ways of knowing and where Mother Nature is respected; a way that also includes the individual search for his or her true Self or soul, no matter what name we give for IT or how we choose to conceive of IT. Maybe the mystical scientist will be part of this new development.

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