

# Spirituality shaped through cultural understandings, anthropologist says

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Buddhism, symbolized by this reclining Buddha in Wat Phra That Hariphunchai temple, Thailand, inspires a different set of spiritual experiences than evangelical Christianity, according to Stanford anthropology Professor Tanya Luhrmann. Credit: Jedsada Kiatpornmongkol / Shutterstock

Culture makes a significant difference in how people experience spirituality, according to new Stanford research.

Christians might "kindle" or generate different kinds of spiritual experiences than Buddhists because their cultural understandings of these mental or [bodily sensations](#) are different, said Tanya Luhrmann, a Stanford anthropology professor and co-author of a new article in *Current Anthropology*.

"We suggest that phenomenological experience is always the result of the interaction between expectation, cultural invitation, spiritual practice and bodily responsiveness," she wrote.

Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. As Luhrmann noted, comparing spiritual or phenomenological experiences across different social settings "shows us how deeply cultural expectations shape intimate human experience."

Bodily or mental sensations have different

meanings in different spiritual traditions, Luhrmann said. One person may feel a damp coldness and believe that a demon is present. Another person may shake uncontrollably and attribute this to the Holy Spirit. A third feels a light, floating sensation – this is what happens when he meditates.

Luhrmann's research examined how the presence of a specific cultural name for a mental or bodily sensation may affect that sensation within a specific cultural and social setting. Her co-author was Julia Cassaniti, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago.

"We call this the 'cultural kindling' of the spiritual experience," said Luhrmann, the Watkins University Professor in the Stanford Department of Anthropology.

In an interview, Luhrmann elaborated on cultural kindling as the way people "think about thinking and sleeping and other everyday experiences, along with the way people think about God, which will affect the kind of startling, spontaneous experiences they identify as spiritual experiences."

## Mental, bodily sensations

Luhrmann and Cassaniti conducted open-ended interviews with 33 American members of evangelical churches in Northern California and 20 members of a Thai Buddhist community in northern Thailand. In hour-long formats, the subjects were asked questions such as, "What has been your most memorable spiritual experience?" and "Would you say that you hear from God?"

They were also queried on whether they experienced [sleep paralysis](#), overwhelming emotions – such as moments of joy – adrenaline rushes, uncontrollable shaking and demonic presences and how they understood these sensations through their own spiritual perceptions.

The research findings revealed the importance of local culture on spiritual perceptions.

"The Americans were more likely than the Thai to report cataplexy (loss of muscular function), adrenaline rushes and overwhelming emotion as spiritual experiences, and they were more likely to report everyday encounters with demons," Luhrmann said.

Luhrmann said that if a [spiritual experience](#) has a specific name in the local religion, then the physiological sensation that is understood to be the sign of that experience is more likely to be reported to the researchers.

For example, she said, the "Holy Spirit" experience – or adrenalin rush – is inherent to the evangelical Christian belief system. For a Buddhist, such a sensation is understood to be contrary to spiritual goals.

Bodily sensations like sleep paralysis have been sometimes associated with the spiritual world in folklore, said Luhrmann. Thais have a specific name for sleep paralysis – they were much more aware of it than Americans. As a result, they reported it in the research more often.

"When sleep paralysis takes place, one feels one is awake but cannot move. Often the person with sleep paralysis experiences a heavy weight on the chest and perceives another, often menacing, figure in the room," she said.

Luhrmann was particularly surprised by the differences in how people in two different cultures described sleep paralysis.

"You'd think it would occur more or less in similar ways around the world, because the event seems to be caused in part by a disruption of the REM cycle. But in fact, the Thai were much more attentive to it and reported it more commonly and with more elaboration than the Americans," she said.

In fact, Luhrmann added, significant cultural variations in the experience of sleep paralysis likely exist around the world.

## Varieties of religious experiences

Different religions value different kinds of experiences, the research showed.

"Buddhism has no divinity, no omniscient presence. The goal for a Thai Buddhist is to detach and feel untethered from the cycle of suffering," Luhrmann wrote.

Thai subjects were more likely to use an idiom of "weight" to describe their feelings of lightness and calm, which is often connected with meditation.

"A mind that is concentrated (as it should be in meditation) is a mind and body that is light," said Luhrmann.

In contrast, evangelical spirituality in the United States is focused on encountering a specific being who touches his followers through his "presence."

Luhrmann wrote, "Overwhelming emotions that feel uncontrolled become signs of that divine being because the controlling agency is attributed to God."

## Paying attention to the mind

People lower the threshold for future spiritual experiences if they've already had powerful ones as defined by their culture, Luhrmann said.

"When people attend to their mind with more care and more interest in the supernatural, the partial perceptions and fleeting thoughts, the often unnoticed shifts in awareness that get ignored in most daily life, are allowed to flower into meaning," the researchers wrote.

As a result, Christianity might kindle different kinds of spiritual experiences than Buddhism, Luhrmann said.

Luhrmann said that the way people think about spiritual experiences will shape the spiritual experiences they remember and report.

"Yet some bodies, either because of trauma or genetic inheritance, may be more likely to

experience certain striking anomalous events often thought to be spiritual, like out-of-body experiences, or sleep paralysis, than others," she said.

**More information:** Cassaniti, Julia L and Tanya Marie Luhrmann. 2014. "The Cultural Kindling of Spiritual Experiences." *Current Anthropology*. DOI: 10.1086/677881

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