

APPENDIX ONE

Kundalini

Your life alone, great Mother, is the breath of every creature,”¹ wrote the nineteenth-century Bengali poet Ramprasad. His lines touch the mystery of kundalini shakti, the inner power that many yogic texts describe as the force behind spiritual growth. Kundalini is a mystery, a source of both fascination and confusion, and the subject of one of the most esoteric branches of spiritual literature. It is also a very palpable—though subtle—energy that you will begin to recognize as your meditation unfolds.

Mentioned in Indian yogic texts dating at least as far back as the sixth century CE, kundalini is also described in the Taoist yoga manual *The Secret of the Golden Flower* and in many key texts of Tibetan yoga. In our time, traditional texts on kundalini yoga like the *Shiva Samhita* and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* are available through online booksellers, along with contemporary scholarly and popular books on the subject. Many longtime

meditators, especially those who have been initiated by teachers of certain Indian and Tibetan Guru lineages, have experienced kundalini in the course of their practice. Even so, kundalini is often discussed—at least, on the face of it—in many classical yogic texts as if it were an almost mechanical energy, an energy that can be manipulated, an energy that one can learn to control or that can go awry.

In fact, kundalini is much more than that, and here is the heart of both its fascination and its mystery. As French scholar Jean Varenne says in *Yoga and the Hindu Tradition*, “The kundalini is shakti, the divine power incarnated in the body and inextricably involved in its destiny.”² The sages who compiled the Hindu Tantras, yogic texts in which kundalini is invoked and celebrated, regarded it as an inner form of the divine feminine, the Goddess, whose special gift to us is spiritual awareness.³ As a verse in the *Niruttara Tantra* states, “Without knowledge of shakti, liberation is unattainable.”⁴

In the Tantric tradition, the name *kundalini*—which means “coiled”—is one of the names for the cosmic creative energy, the shakti or power aspect of the divine, and to understand how she works within the human body, we need to understand this basic fact about her nature. This tradition, which includes the texts of Kashmir Shaivism, describes the ultimate reality as an inseparable dyad known as Shiva/Shakti. Often personified in mythology as a divine couple, Shiva and Shakti represent the two complementary poles of a single unbroken divine reality. Shiva is the still ground, the pure witnessing Consciousness that contains all that is. Shakti is the dynamic

creative power inherent in reality, the power that, according to the tradition, manifests universes in blissful freedom. As the *Pratyabhijna Hridayam* puts it, “Supremely independent Chiti [a name for shakti] is the cause of the manifestation, maintenance, and reabsorption of the universe. She manifests it upon her own screen.”⁵ Shakti, then, is the energy that becomes everything in the universe—and everything beyond the universe. She is Becoming itself, the primordial creative ground within which all becoming manifests. There is nothing in this universe or beyond it that is *not* shakti, and thus nothing which is without consciousness, since shakti is above all conscious, alive, sentient. This is a radical notion, though easier to grasp when you have some understanding of quantum physics.

Shakti, the Kashmir Shaivite texts tell us, becomes the universe by a process of contraction—vast, formless, infinitely subtle energy becoming solidified into matter, rather as vapor condenses to form water and then ice. As the cosmic energy contracts, she veils her real nature, concealing herself behind the screen of forms—and identifying herself as particular forms, bodies, and egos. When shakti is contracted, a human being—who is in essence pure, free Consciousness—identifies with his own body, mind, and personal history. So he cannot really know the truth about himself.

This is an essential point of the tantric worldview: the very power that has manifested the forms of this world works inside us to turn our senses outward and create the illusion that we are a particular individual, separate from all else. Therefore, there can be no experience of oneness unless the power consents, as it were, to turn the mind within and reveal the essence behind forms.

When we are in this state of contraction and limitation, kundalini is said to be “asleep.” In this state, our energy is bound up in identification with the limitations of the body, mind, and personal history—the condition called “ego” or self-contraction. What is called “the awakening of kundalini” is actually the reversal of the energy’s contracting tendency, so that instead of concealing the truth that we are pure energy, light, and bliss, the awakened kundalini begins to *reveal* it. But first the human body has to be prepared to experience itself as pure Consciousness. Otherwise, our physical density, our physical and psychological blockages, and our emotional blockages, distortions, and fears make it impossible for us to contain the level of energy that the expanded kundalini would let loose in our system.

So typically, when the awakening takes place, the energy that has been turning the mind and senses outward and giving us the experience of separation and difference, now begins to facilitate the movement toward inwardness and unity. The energy moves through the physical body, as well as the subtle system, purifying them, removing toxins from the system, dispelling emotional blocks, making the mind subtle, and giving it the power to focus inward.

Kundalini works through the prana, the vital force in the body, and through the pranic channels called nadis. Most yogic traditions describe the action of kundalini as a rising movement, where the energy flows upward through a subtle channel called the sushumna nadi, which runs from the base of the spine to the crown of the head within our subtle, or energetic, system. But it also flows with the vital force *throughout* the body, removing blockages from

the physical nervous system as well as from the energy channels. When kundalini is working within the body, it will create a variety of physical and psychological effects. Some of the physical effects have been described in chapter 9. Others can be found in the literature mentioned in the Notes and Further Reading sections.

Psychologically, the activity of kundalini gives enormous power to any practice or discipline we have been doing—whether meditation, yoga, psychotherapy, art, or self-help work. This power may be felt as a direct sense of being blessed, inspired, or transformed from within, as fears fall away, and higher emotions like courage and love arise. Kundalini can dramatically increase your spiritual aspiration and capacity for practice. On another front, it may bring up buried emotions or memories, allowing you to face them directly. Moreover, the awakened energy supports any practice you use to clear your psychological blocks, beliefs, and personal traumas, so that every form of self-help work, as well as spiritual practice, gives results more quickly.

For me, like many others, the most dramatic shift I noticed when my kundalini awoke was a measurable deepening of my meditation practice. Practices I had been doing for some time with very little result began to open realms within my heart and mind that I’d never experienced before. States of meditation began to arise spontaneously, along with spiritual insights and a new level of philosophical understanding, creativity, and open-heartedness. At the same time, there would be periods of emotional upheaval, when long-buried emotional wounds would surface—and I had to learn how to work with them without, say, acting out a burst of anger, or getting lost in sadness,

or believing that a feeling of romantic infatuation necessarily heralded a soul-mate connection.

If you are what the texts call an average “worldly” aspirant—that is, a practitioner who has not gone through the rigorous disciplines of the traditional yogic schools—it is normal for the kundalini to work initially on the physical and psychological levels. Many Western writers, following Carl Jung, associate these psychological shifts with the movement of kundalini through the chakras. But most traditional texts consider the opening of the chakras to be a separate movement of kundalini, one that may take place simultaneously with the physical and psychological purification process, but which often occurs only after a certain amount of purification has already taken place.

In this process, called *vedha mayi*, or the piercing of the centers, kundalini moves through the chakras, or spiritual centers that lie along the sushumna nadi; it opens them, thus opening the doors to the mystical dimensions of experience. Eventually, as kundalini becomes stable in the topmost chakra in the crown of the head, the practitioner experiences union—oneness with all things. Over time, this experience begins to permeate the activity of the outgoing senses, allowing the experience of uninterrupted unity consciousness.

KUNDALINI AND THE TRADITIONS

Since kundalini is a universal power, its effects have been felt—and recorded—by mystics of every tradition and also by many who would not call themselves mystics. The visions, raptures, insights, and mystical realizations described by Christian mystics

like Teresa of Avila or Hildegard of Bingen, by Jewish mystics like Baal Shem Tov, and by Sufi, Taoist, and Buddhist practitioners, correspond to experiences of awakened kundalini described in Indian yogic texts. Vajrayana Buddhist writings, as well as some of the writings in Western hermetic and Kabbalistic traditions, closely resemble descriptions of kundalini found in the Hindu Tantras. Elaine Pagels, in *The Gnostic Gospels*, quotes an early text of Gnostic Christianity that says, “In every human being dwells an infinite power, the root of the universe. That infinite power exists in a latent condition in everyone.”⁶

Christian writers speak of this spiritual energy as the Holy Spirit. In Chinese yoga, it is called inner *chi*; and in Japanese, inner *ki*, to distinguish it from the external physical energy. The !Kung bushmen of Africa speak of a powerful subtle energy called *num*,⁷ while the Hopi of the American Southwest describe the human spinal column as an axis containing vibratory centers.⁸ These centers correspond to the chakra system of kundalini yoga.

In the Indian yogic texts, kundalini is often depicted as a serpent. Sir John Woodroffe, the first Western scholar to write extensively about the Indian tradition of kundalini yoga, referred to kundalini as the serpent power. Revered texts from Egypt and the Celtic traditions associate the image of the serpent with the ancient goddess religions. Some contemporary writers in the Kabbalistic tradition have pointed out that the serpent in the Garden of Eden might be associated with kundalini and the initiation into higher knowledge. Carlos Suares, in *The Cipher of Genesis*, describes how Kabbalah refers to the serpent that appeared to Adam and Esha (Eve) in the Garden of Eden as the

*Explore the life that is the
life of your present form.
One day you will discover
It is not different
From the life of
the Secret One,
And your heart will
sing triumphant songs
Of being at home
everywhere.*

—THE RADIANCE SUTRAS¹⁰

resurrection of Aleph, the principle of all that is and all that is not, from its entombment in earth.⁹ According to this tradition, when the serpent appears, Adam and Eve are just emerging from a state of deep oblivion. The task of the serpent is to awaken them and begin their journey of evolution. One Kabbalistic text states that when the voice of God questions Eve about this event, what she actually says is not, “The serpent beguiled me.” Instead, she explains that the serpent has blended his earthly fire with her lost heavenly fire, which has come to life again.

AWAKENING KUNDALINI

How then is kundalini awakened? The Eastern texts tell us that it can happen in one of four ways: spontaneously, perhaps as a result of previous practices; through certain hatha yoga postures and breathing exercises;* through concentrated meditation, worship, and prayer; or through the transmission of energy from a guru. Traditional texts say that the most natural and safe means of awakening kundalini is through the transmission of energy

*Traditional teachers sometimes warn students that when forceful hatha yoga and pranayama are practiced to activate kundalini, it can create a sudden or partial awakening that can be harmful to the practitioner. For that reason, it's important to do such practices only with an experienced guide.

from a guru whose own kundalini is fully unfolded. This process, called shaktipat in the Shaiva yoga tradition of India, is rare but extremely effective. When the guru activates the energy, a connection is formed between the guru and the student through which the energy is automatically regulated and guided.

When the kundalini is awakened through other means—through practice, or as a spontaneous arising—it is still important to have guidance and advice from qualified teachers. A knowledgeable teacher can help you work with the awakened energy, and can help you understand what the spontaneous movements and experiences actually mean. In most people, the energy works according to the individual's preparedness and needs, yet if the awakening has been strong and the person is unprepared or ignorant about the process, fear and misunderstanding can create problems unless there is proper guidance. Of course, this is particularly true for anyone who is psychologically unstable. While the awakened kundalini can help cure psychological imbalances, it can also exacerbate them. A person who has such an imbalance should continue with their therapeutic regime, taking medication if appropriate, and receiving counseling.

For the average practitioner, however, kundalini is a powerful aid to practice. The awakened energy gives impetus to any practice they might be doing, so that even very simple practices can bring profound insights and openings in their wake. This is especially true when the practitioner understands the nature of the energy. However, it is important for the practitioner to have a practical, experimental attitude and sense of how their own system responds to it.

Below, I offer some tips on how to work with an unfolding kundalini.

Attitudes That Support Kundalini Unfolding

First, understand that kundalini is your own vital energy—not something imposed from outside. Therefore, when it works within you, it is working through your system, and under normal circumstances will process and purify at the rate suited for your constitution and inner preparation.

Second, recognize that kundalini is not just a personal or physical energy. It is our personal portion, as it were, of the divine creative energy of the universe. The more we are able to see this, and to appreciate and respect the cosmic quality in kundalini, the more loving will be our experience of it. In chapter 8, I describe how, when we take a respectful attitude toward kundalini, the energy itself will begin to guide and teach us from within. Everyone needs to develop their own relationship with the energy, and to learn how to distinguish the guidance of the kundalini from the various voices of the egoic mind. Over time, with appropriate feedback and attention, we do begin to recognize how kundalini works within us, and to know how to partner with it.

Third, an important aspect of working with kundalini is diet and exercise. Traditionally, a diet rich in protein, fruits, and vegetables will help nourish the energy. When it is working intensely, sweet cooling fragrances like sandalwood can help settle it. So can vigorous physical exercise. It's important to eat regularly—three light meals a day—when kundalini is

working strongly, because the energy can eat up nutrients if not fed. When this happens, we may lose weight, and feel weak or off-kilter. Tonic herbs, either Chinese or Ayurvedic, can help with this, as can remembering to eat more protein. On the other hand, disciplined food intake allows the energy to work dynamically—if you overeat, it will dampen the energy.

Nourished with discipline and understanding, kundalini will spiritualize your life in myriad ways. The ultimate effect of practice with an awakened kundalini is the experience of union: the union of the human consciousness with the vast Consciousness of which it is a part, or as the yogic texts put it, the recognition that there is no separation between ourselves and the whole. In this state, the Self recognizes herself, and we realize our own true identity as limitless Consciousness—while rejoicing in our unique particularity, our own place in the cosmic dance. This is the state called nondual—literally, not-two—in which we can simultaneously experience the diversity of the multiverse and recognize that none of it is different from Awareness itself.

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