

The Guru's Gift: A Kundalini Awakening

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CHAPTER 2

What is Kundalini?

Today more and more people are finding themselves with the symptoms of *Kundalini* awakening having taken, whether they knew it or not, “the plunge.” The meditator who inadvertently takes a *Kundalini* Yoga class thinking to try something new, or the person who signs up for a transformative workshop may end up, either during the event or some time after, finding a fire or a snake-like movement rising up through the spine that brings a surge of enormous power and energy.

What has occurred, and what is now occurring with increasing frequency on our transforming planet as more people around the world turn to meditation and yoga, is the awakening of the cosmic *Kundalini* energy—the quickening. In ancient times, this extraordinary good fortune only occurred to few selected initiates after years of careful preparation. However, this awakening is no longer the exclusive domain of religious sects, secret societies or religious adepts. Today the information about this phenomenon is available all over the world; more and more people are activating their *Kundalini* spontaneously or with very little effort.

The energy that may suddenly surge through the spine creates an intense opening; the “god-force” or Holy Spirit is active and flowing through the subtle channels of the nervous system. It is as if 1000 watts are coursing through the 100-watt light bulb of one’s nervous system. This is one sign that the *Kundalini* energy is actively transforming the person.

This process has not been widely publicized or taught in the West, and it is still not widely known among doctors today. How can such a phenomena exist within us, be a biological process, create such a huge challenge to our equilibrium, transform our psyche and life, and yet not be known in our Western world? Even though this force is an integral part of every human being, most people have no idea that the *Kundalini* even exists! Yet, like any practical person, they would ask: Where is *Kundalini* located in the physical body?

It is said to be coiled up in the very lower region of the torso, the perineum area between the anus and sexual organs and rises in a spiral, like a cobra rising from a basket. But it is not found by surgery, for it is part of the subtle nervous system. The *Shakti Kundalini* according to Joseph Campbell is a "little female serpent ... about as thick as the hair of the boar, white and coiled three and a half times around a symbolic *lingam*."¹ David Gordon White in *The Alchemical Body* concurs that the *Kundalini* as a serpent "sleeps coiled...with her mouth closed over an internal *linga* in the lower abdomen."² The hidden, or inner form of *Kundalini* is usually asleep in a small "bulb" of energy that is stored at the base of the spine. According to Bonnie Greenwell, author of *Energies of Transformation*:

... after Kundalini enters the fetus and activates the pranic system the residual energy coils 3 1/2 times at the base of the spine, and goes into a dormant state. The mind becomes engaged in the process of living, and we identify with our bodies, our genetic heritage and our mental, sensate and emotional processes, separating from any awareness of the Self or the Soul or the source of our existence...³

For most people this is the extent of *Kundalini* awareness. Joseph Chilton Pearce believes *Kundalini* rises at puberty and mid-life to a minor extent; although we have all had adolescent experiences of heightened emotions, identity crises, overwhelming sexual confusion, and strange soul-like longings, we are never informed that this is our own spirit rising within us asking to be released. The only approved Western answer to this yearning is to see a psychiatrist for medication to shut it down. The modern Western youth often has little choice but to turn to street drugs, alcohol or smoking to numb the inner spirit that will not be denied. What a terrible waste of the inheritance of a human body and this very rare birth.

In India and other areas of the world where this knowledge of *Kundalini* is cultivated, the yoga apprentices practice for decades with vigorous postures and discipline to activate the *Kundalini* energy. Sufi's spin in their spiritual dances and reach states of bliss. American Indian youth go on vision quests alone to find this inner pathway to the soul. African dancers and Dervish dancers create hypnotic states in order to enter altered realities. Chinese martial arts practitioners begin training in childhood to acquire advanced magical skills. Indeed, athletes, dancers and yogic adepts can reach these states through release of endorphins as they challenge their physical bodies beyond normal limits. Any human activity that takes one into realms of ecstasy can enable and support the journey of inner discovery that is the beginning of the *Kundalini* awakening.

Although *Kundalini* appears in many traditions and cultures throughout history, it was virtually an unknown concept in the West in 1979. Subsequently, I have found that it is a universal phenomena, much like puberty or menopause, except it relates less to the development of the physical body, but to the spiritual development of all human beings.

I can talk about it and describe my symptoms, but words cannot encompass a definition of what *Kundalini* is or feels like, for it is known solely through experience. Nathan Swartz-Salant explains it succinctly:

Whoever has known the *numinosum* in a deep enough way for his or her life to have been unalterably changed by it—changed in such a way that they now *see* differently and now experience the center of personality as existing outside the ego—such a person never *understands* this process. It for ever remains a mystery, one that he or she has been graced to participate in, and survive.⁴

My teacher explained that within our bodies is this power found in all beings called *Kundalini*, which is the feminine holy spirit within; it lies relatively dormant for most of our lives until it can be triggered to awaken. The constant bliss and happiness which we intuitively know lies within the realm of our experience but which is so elusive most of our lives, can be found as a result of a *Kundalini* awakening. That awakening will shift our focus from the outside world towards the inner worlds. The *Kundalini* process transforms us from veiled outward seeking unconsciousness to awakened inward seeking consciousness and enlightened insight.

It is apparent now according to Lee Sannella, a psychiatrist who has written a seminal work on what he calls "a form of psychospiritual energy" the *Kundalini* Shakti, that the "phenomena in the process of psychospiritual transformation...are constant and universal, transcending personal and cultural differences."⁵ According to his research, *Kundalini* is integral to the teachings of "Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Taoism," some "American Indian tribes, and ...even of the Bushmen of Africa." It however, was "most carefully studied and conceptually elaborated" in Hindu India.⁶

Although the word *Kundalini* may appear strange for many readers and the concept of it even incomprehensible to the Western mind, in fact it is closer to each person than his own heart. *Kundalini* is closer than the breath in the body for it is the breather and the breath. In its dormant form it is the very *essence* of all life. Again Sannella asserts that the “process of psychophysiological transmutation, most usefully viewed as the ‘awakening of the kundalini,’ is indeed a reality...[and] is part of an evolutionary mechanism...that is intrinsically desirable.”⁷

It is this energy, *Kundalini*, that pervades and enervates the world as we see it. Ajit Mookerjee claims that “The coiled Kundalini is the female energy existing in latent form, not only in every human being but in every atom of the universe.”⁸ He continues, “The arousal of Kundalini is ...the basis of all yogic disciplines, and every genuine spiritual experience may be considered a flowering of this physio-nuclear energy.”⁹

I have come to experience that *Kundalini* as the scouring pad or force that cleans out the dross and negativity of many past lives. *Kundalini* is one's companion on this journey; She a Goddess that is the light that lightens and enlightens the path in every sense. She transforms ignorance and misery; She takes away the dread and horror of our deepest fears, guiding the bound soul into the realms of light. I did not realize how powerful and awesome my teacher was, nor how lucky I was to have his support when this awakening occurred. The awakening is a step out of the obsession with materiality, into the awareness of our cosmic role as conscious, aware beings.

However, this plunge into the inner worlds can be shattering to the logical mind, the “Little Ego” that has controlled our awareness and kept it focused on material issues. The realm the meditator enters seems to have no rules, no laws, no script. This is

unnerving to the logical mind. We are used to depending upon our “consensual reality.” We are not prepared for this silence, for this peace, nor for this encounter with our hidden “pain body” selves.

In meditation and chanting or when focused on a creative task it is known that the left and right brains merge. The awakened *Kundalini* joins the bi-cameral brain into one unified channel of awareness. We have been dominated by the consensual reality of the ego = left brain, so most people are unaware that we have any other perceptual possibilities in every-day life except for dreams or nightmares unless they have experimented with psychedelic drugs.

Moving into this unified awareness disturbs our normal reality, and can create some strange experiences. “Even for an experienced meditator, nothing is more unknown than this territory. Anything can happen here.”¹⁰ Jung would call this the archetypal realm. We recognize the ancient mythological stories of Greek Gods as insights into this archetypal realm. Carlos Castaneda’s don Juan, the sorcerer, would call it the *Nagual*. Others would call it “hallucinations,” “altered reality” or “noosphere.”

Gopi Krishna famously awakened his *Kundalini* by meditation and wrote extensively about this experience. He says that “When accidentally the center [*Kundalini*] begins to function prematurely, before the nerve connections and links have been fully established...delicate tissues of the body are likely to be damaged.”¹¹ A minor example of this damage would be when one has taken too much stimulant like coffee and one’s mind and heart become hyperactive.

Ideally we should be being prepared for this awakening in our youth by knowledge of the *Kundalini*, spiritual practices and careful diet; then the awakening

would come after preparation of the subtle body when a person is entirely ripe. Yet such awakenings happen without preparation. A housewife giving birth to a child may activate this center and be totally unaware of what has happened which is what occurred with Christina Grof, author of *The Stormy Search for the Self* and wife of Dr. Stanislav Grof. The experimental meditator who seeks the ancient wisdom and peace within sincerely may activate the *Kundalini* to awaken and begin the rigorous cleansing of his or her subconscious; it is like a car without brakes, unexpectedly this power has taken over one's "self control" mechanisms.

The Heroic Journey: It can be daunting to the uninitiated, entailing lonely courage and stamina. Joseph Campbell wrote about this historical journey into the inner mysteries of the psyche in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; Campbell lays the burden upon each individual to find this path, no matter how insane he/she appears to his society or culture.

The modern hero, ... who dares to heed the call ...cannot, indeed, must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding. ... so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal— carries the cross of the redeemer....¹²

What hero does not want to heed the call and rush into this experience? Some who hear about this phenomenon want to awaken the *Kundalini* themselves having heard of the amazing powers that arise from it. Unfortunately, this would be foolish and unwise motivation to awaken *Kundalini*. This process is a serious transformation of the mind, awareness, physiology and psychology. It is a hero's journey because, although bliss is integral to the experience, the mind and ego undergo some significant

disturbances. It is not a picnic or a comfortable transition for most people. I caution anyone who makes the effort to awaken without the help of an experienced, benevolent teacher.

Advaita: Although my teacher and many other gurus from India advocated the awakened *Kundalini* as essential to spiritual growth, not all teachers say such a challenging path is required to know our true nature. A less stressful and dramatic awakening method advocated by Ramana Maharshi is *Advaita* or the “Direct Path.” He says, “Reality is simply the loss of the ego. Destroy the ego by seeking its identity...it will automatically vanish and Reality will shine forth by itself. This is the direct method.”¹³ This method does not mention *Kundalini* as required for such understanding and, for those who desire an awakening without the drama and scouring of the dark unconscious, this path would be less troublesome, less painful, and less disruptive. However, there is some question for me whether the people who are attracted to this path have had their *Kundalini* awakened in previous lives, and thus their spiritual centers are already opened. It is possible that in this life, they are perhaps just seeking the final stages of full awakening, for which this Direct Method is ideal.

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj a great Nath teacher from Mumbai, also promoted non-duality like Maharshi and was not interested in discussing *Kundalini* awakening as a path to self realization. He said that with the phenomena of the *Kundalini*, “You might also have visions of various gods... but in the process of trying to experience and observe all these things, it is easy to forget the way toward self-realization.”¹⁴ I understand this now to be a real possibility as I experienced this same problem. The “Little Ego” becomes

enamored of the excitement and drama of the inner scouring process, so the focus is on that instead of the ultimate goal of complete silence and self-realization.

The Goddess: Thus, even with the *Kundalini* awakening helping along the journey, there are pitfalls for the earnest seeker where the “Little Ego” refuses to release control of awareness; one may adopt a “spiritual lifestyle” and replace one’s former habits and mental attachments to material things looking “holy” or “spiritual,” but these also become obstacles that must be recognized. So even though *Kundalini* is our helper and guide on the journey, even though She is the transducer of the *Kundalini* power into something our bodies can handle, yet She may not bring full realization; She can clear the path, but we have to make the courageous effort to allow the process and surrender to it. There is still a great deal of self-effort, grace and guidance needed from within and most of all—enthusiasm--before the full attainment.

However, once the *Kundalini* has awakened there is no choice than to surrender. to get on board and experience the ride into the blisses, the terrors, the joys and the nightmares of the unconscious realms to face down any demons that lurk there. There is no turning back from this journey although many wish there were. Fortunately, there are courageous beings like my own teacher and many other revered guides who can tell us about this journey and guide us. Perhaps it is as well that the *Kundalini* gives us little choice once she uncoils. As Elizabeth Gilbert author of *Eat, Pray, Love* so aptly explains, “The search for God is a reversal of the normal, mundane worldly order. In the search for God, you revert from what attracts you and swim toward that which is difficult.”¹⁵ This is not a path for everyone, nor would I ever advise it without that person being aware of the journey and at least some of what it entails.

In 1979, I ventured forth into this realm, not because I was brave, although I ended up having to find extraordinary depths of courage; it was not because I had any idea what was coming and wanted to win over adversity, or even because I wanted to be a hero-warrior in some way. I was not even consciously aware of being a spiritual seeker. Yet once my little white snake was awakened, I ventured forth with enormous enthusiasm because of the trust and faith I had for my teacher, and because the door opened first into the blissful gifts and mystical wonder of awakened *Kundalini*.

Joseph Campbell explains this blind enthusiasm, “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”¹⁶

I found first the incredible *fun* and discovery that this open door offered me. The blissful spinning around my house, the constant sense of being loved unconditionally by my “other” or “higher self,” the waves of joy emanating from my heart most of the time were all great incentives to proceed. My nature as an enthusiastic person as well as my spirit’s leap of joy at finding this door open to me spurred me forward. I could not wait to enter this realm, to go through and find the treasure that lay within. Yet like all quests for the “Holy Grail,” there are difficulties and struggles to be overcome.

According to Richard Perala, “Earth humans are probably the most complex species in the galaxy. Remember that you took on the greatest challenge of any species—to cut yourself off from all memory of the Source and then try to claw your way back to unconditional love. No other species would be that courageous.”¹⁷ It takes courage of a kind that we rarely get to experience or find in ourselves. We venture into a whole new

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realm of awareness because this precious body, this auspicious birth, is the instrument through which we can know our true nature. The prize is not about powers, new levels of entertainment, celebrity or wealth. The prize is returning to the truth of our innate nature and finding out what a *full human being* can be as a complete planetary soul integrated into the universal soul. For this simple experience, all the difficulties and confusions are worth it; who does not want to move into the next phase of human evolution?

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