

Kundalini FAQ

KUNDALINI: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND SELECTED REFERENCES

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This FAQ gives a background on the phenomenon of kundalini and is assumed material before reading the other related articles:

[Siddha Mahayoga FAQ](#)

[Kundalini Yogas FAQ](#)

[The Siddha Mahayoga Tradition of Swami Shivom Tirth](#)

I bow to the vibrant source of my innermost bliss.

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What is kundalini?

``Kundalini" literally means coiling, like a snake. In the classical literature of hatha yoga kundalini is described as a coiled serpent at the base of the spine. The image of coiling, like a spring, conveys the sense of untapped potential energy. Perhaps more meaningfully kundalini can be described as a great reservoir of creative energy at the base of the spine. It's not useful to sit with our consciousness fixed in our head and think of kundalini as a foreign force running up and down our spine. Unfortunately the serpent image may serve to accentuate this alien nature of the image. It's more useful to think of kundalini energy as the very foundation of our consciousness so that when kundalini moves through our bodies our consciousness necessarily changes with it.

The concept of kundalini can also be examined from a strictly psychological perspective. From this perspective kundalini can be thought of as a rich source of psychic or libidinous energy in our unconscious.

In the classical literature of Kashmir Shaivism kundalini is described in three different manifestations. The first of these is as the universal energy or *para-kundalini*. The second of these is as the energizing function of the body-mind complex or *prana-kundalini*. The third of these is as consciousness or *shakti-kundalini* which simultaneously subsumes and intermediates between these two. Ultimately these three forms are the same but understanding these three different forms will help to understand the different manifestations of kundalini.

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What is the difference between prana and kundalini? What is the difference between qi (or chi) and kundalini?

First let us try to relate to concepts from the same tradition - prana and kundalini. Prana has been translated as the ``vital breath" and ``bio-energetic motility"; it is associated with maintaining the functioning of the mind and body. Kundalini, in its form as prana-kundalini, is identical to prana ; however, Kundalini also has a manifestations as consciousness and a as a unifying cosmic energy. One could ascribe these same aspects to prana as well so past a certain point these become distinctions without differences.

From the subjective standpoint of an individual actually experiencing the awakening of kundalini I have found three completely different opinions:

The first opinion is that a pranic awakening is only a prelude to a full kundalini awakening. Tibetan yogins that I have encountered consider the activation of prana (Tibetan: rlung) as merely a prerequisite for the activation of kundalini (Tibetan: gTummo). What's attractive about this viewpoint is that it explains the difference between the experience of simply having pleasant sensations in the spine and the much more powerful experience of having a ``freight-train"-like full kundalini experience.

The second opinion, espoused by Swami Shivom Tirth for example, is that prana and kundalini are absolutely equivalent and that it is not meaningful in any way to describe a difference between kundalini rising and prana rising. When posed with question as to how to distinguish between pleasant sensations that show some pranic-activity in the spine and the much more powerful experience Swami Shivom Tirth said that the difference is not in the nature of the activity but in the consciousness that observes it. If the consciousness that experiences the pranic activity is seated within the spine (or more correctly, the central channel, known as the sushumna), then the experience is felt much more powerfully.

The third opinion, espoused by the modern hatha yogin, Desikaran, is that pranic awakening is the true

experience to be aimed for and kundalini is actually an obstruction. Desikaran sees the kundalini as a block in the central channel and thus the kundalini must be "killed" to make way for the prana. This is the most unusual view of the three.

The Chinese concept of qi (or chi) can be safely identified with the Indian concept of prana.

If all this seems confusing - don't worry, you're in good company. My conclusion is that these are all different terminologies for dealing with a common set of experiences. Any one of these viewpoints is adequate for describing the full range of experiences. What is probably more relevant is to distinguish two different experiences which are often confused. In one an individual experiences some pleasant energizing electric energy running along the spine. This experience itself brings about a wide range of experiences and results in vitality and sensitivity. Another very distinct experience is the experience of kundalini entering the sushumna and rising up the spine. As soon as kundalini enters the sushumna this experience will completely overwhelm ordinary waking consciousness. From the moment that kundalini enters the sushumna there will no longer be a distinction between the subjective consciousness which experiences and the object of experience. This experience much more profoundly transfigures consciousness.

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If kundalini is universal, why do some kundalini yogins seem to have more kundalini-energy than others ??

It's an intriguing question. If an individual's kundalini is viewed as simply a personal reservoir of a cosmic energy then why would one person appear to have more of a reservoir of kundalini energy than another? Nevertheless, this does appear to be the case. This is probably another advantage of the viewpoint that prana (or qi) is the same as kundalini. Some Chinese texts distinguish between "innate qi" or "pre-natal qi" that one is born with and "cultivated qi" that can be developed. Clearly some people simply have more "innate qi." This manifests as a stronger more resilient body and greater general vitality.

Through training those that have relatively weak "innate qi" may surpass those who have strong "innate qi" but do not train. There are many stories in the Chinese literature of Qi Gong about people who took up Qi Gong in order to improve their poor health became powerful martial artists or great qi gong masters. Of course those that have strong "innate qi" and also train their qi may develop the strongest qi of all.

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What does kundalini have to do with spiritual enlightenment? What is the goal of kundalini yoga?

First we need a few concepts: In yogic anatomy the sushumna is the central channel and conduit for the kundalini energy that runs along our spine and up to the crown of our head. Along this channel are placed additional channel networks called cakras. These cakras are associated with major aspects of our anatomy - for example our throat, heart, solar plexus, and in turn these aspects of our anatomy are related to aspects of our human nature. According to the literature of kundalini yoga our experience of these centers is limited due to knots which restrict the flow of energy into these centers. Three knots are particularly important. The knot of *Brahma* which restricts the center at the base of the spine. The knot of *Vishnu* which restricts the heart center and the knot of *Rudra* which restricts the center between the eyebrows. These knots form an important framework in yogic thinking and the stages toward enlightenment are articulated in terms of breaking through these knots in the yogic classic the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* as well as in some of the yoga upanishads. Specifically, four stages of progress are described:

arambha,
ghata,
parichaya and
nishpatti.

Arambha is associated with breaking the knot of *Brahma* and the awakening of kundalini. *Ghata* is associated with breaking the knot of *Vishnu* and with internal absorption. *Parichaya* the absorption deepens and in *nishpatti* the knot of *Rudra* is pierced and the kundalini may ascend to the center at the crown of the head. In this state transcendence is integrated and, according to the yogic literature, the yogi has nothing more to attain.

Putting these elaborate physiological descriptions aside, the goal of kundalini yoga is the same as the goal of any legitimate spiritual practice: To be liberated from the limited bounds of the self-centered and alienated ego. In kundalini yoga this is associated with internal manifestations of the kundalini but the external manifestations should be similar to any other legitimate spiritual practice.

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So does everyone agree that kundalini awakening is necessary for enlightenment?

The view that kundalini awakening is necessary for enlightenment is held in the diverse literature of Kashmir Shaivism and in other Hindu Tantric literature. It is found in the literature of the Hatha Yogis and the Nath Sampradaya. You will find similar views in many Buddhist Tantric works. In addition this view is held by recent spiritual figures such as Shri Ramakrishna, Swami Sivananda, Paramahansa Yogananda and Swami Vivekananda and of course by contemporary kundalini yogins themselves.

Nevertheless there are some dissenters from this view. These include Sri Chinmoy, Da Free John and Gurdjieff. Dissent can take a number of different forms. For Gurdjieff kundalini is associated only with a binding force that leads us to be more attached to the world. Such a view of kundalini is not entirely inaccurate but only reflects the functioning of kundalini in the lower energy centers. For Sri Chinmoy kundalini is an amplifying function that may make an individual more powerful but not more enlightened. From my perspective this also only addresses the impact of kundalini while it operates in the lower energy centers.

Da Free John (born Franklin Jones, a. k. a. Da Love Ananda) has a much more fundamental criticism of kundalini. As far as I understand his position, for him enlightenment cannot be the result of an experience; it is a cognitive transformation. Kundalini may evoke a wide variety of experiences but these are not in and of themselves enlightening. This is an interesting perspective but it seems to assume that the raising of kundalini is an experience in which an ego-consciousness experiences a separate object known as kundalini. Again, this view is consistent with the experience of kundalini in the lower energy centers in which the ego is detached from the movement of kundalini and kundalini experiences are perceived as separate from oneself. However, I would argue that as kundalini rises the ego-consciousness becomes infused in a more fundamental consciousness of *cit-shakti-kundalini* and this experience does in fact produce a fundamental cognitive change.

Finally, there are many other spiritual practices, such as Zen, Vipassana meditation that consider kundalini irrelevant. Some practitioners or even teachers of these paths, such as Jiyu Kennet, may have kundalini experiences but generally kundalini is not a pivotal part of these paths.

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Can I use kundalini yoga simply to improve my health?

Yoga exercises which were traditionally used to purify the body in preparation for awakening the kundalini can also be used simply to improve the health. To practice techniques aimed at actively awakening kundalini with the goal of simply improving your health seems to be a misuse of these powerful techniques.

There are those that teach kundalini yoga principally emphasizing its benefits on health without much discussion of the spiritual benefits. This is how hatha yoga has been taught in the west for some time. The affect of this approach depends on the attitude of the student. There is certainly nothing wrong with trying to

improve your health but there is a tension between awakening an energy that will ultimately burn up the ego and trying to shape that energy to simply fulfill an ego-oriented motive.

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How can I tell if I'm having a real kundalini awakening? Does a kundalini awakening have to be uncomfortable?

Many people, and even published authors on kundalini, associate kundalini awakening with symptoms such as a mild sense of a trickle of energy up the spine. This does indicate some energetic movement, but not, in my opinion, a true kundalini awakening. Nearly every person I know with what I call a "true awakening" has responded to phrases like "the freight train" inside or "the volcano erupting" inside. More fundamentally, in a mild energetic movement the ego stays intact (in a healthy individual) and enjoys the pleasant sensations much like any other physical sensation.

In a "true awakening" the force of kundalini eclipses the ego altogether and the individual is almost certain to feel disoriented for some time. There will almost certainly be periods of pronounced psychological discomfort and social alienation. Works from the literature of Tibetan Buddhism indicate two distinct periods of spiritual emergency. The first is at the beginning of true kundalini awakening in which one feels an acute anxiety and sense of alienation from the world. The second is after the process has considerably advanced and one feels an acute fear of one's own internal groundlessness. Even in the most difficult periods these challenging experiences are balanced by periods of deep bliss and profound awareness. Moreover, in time any negative experiences give way to deep realization.

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Is there any scientific basis for kundalini and the cakras? Do I really have to believe that all these cakras physically exist?

Research on kundalini is especially spotty. There is no compelling work to show that the system represents insights into actual human anatomy. But it's important to understand that kundalini and its network of channels and cakras is simply how yogins have chosen to explain their experience and that yogins from many cultures have arrived at similar, though not identical, concepts. The true physical mechanisms underlying these experiences may be very different from those described. Izaak Bentov has proposed a model to explain kundalini in terms of micro-motion in the brain. In this model experiences are associated with parts of the body, such as the heart, because the part of the brain associated with that part of the body is stimulated by micro-vibrations. His model is treated in "The Kundalini Experience" by Sannella referenced below. From a practical perspective the key thing is our subjective experience and that the roadmap of these subjective experiences has been mapped out.

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Is Chinese qi gong a kind of kundalini yoga?

If there is any contemporary teaching that is even more diverse in approach than kundalini yoga it must be qi gong. As a result it is hard to compare kundalini yoga to qi gong. From my limited exposure to qi gong it is clear there are many qi gong practices that are identical to kundalini yoga practices. What is also clear is that many qi gong practitioners have reported experiences that are identical to those of kundalini yogins. In so far as each of these practices aims at eliminating blocks to the qi/prana energy then they share a common ground.

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What about Tibetan Buddhism - has kundalini been known in Tibet?

Kundalini yoga in the Natha Sampradaya and Vajrayana in Tibetan Buddhism both take their origin from the Mahasiddhas who were active in India from the 8th century to the 12th century. Kundalini yoga practices formed the core of the teachings of a number of these Mahasiddhas and are strongly represented in both Tibetan Buddhist practices and contemporary kundalini yoga practices. Kundalini yoga was spoken of as "Candali yoga" by these Mahasiddhas and became known as gTummo rnal 'byor in Tibet. Candali yoga was a key practice of the famous Tibetan yogin Milarepa. The role of kundalini yoga in Tibetan Buddhism is discussed in more detail in the [Kundalini Yogas FAQ](#).

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Are there any other traditions that show awareness of kundalini?

If you believe that kundalini is at the basis of spiritual progress then every valid spiritual tradition must have some awareness of kundalini. Christianity (especially Quakerism and Pentecostalism), Sufism, Qabalistic mysticism, alchemy and magick all have literature which demonstrates some awareness of the kundalini process but these traditions are not, to this author's awareness, so open in their exposition of the techniques and so it is hard to judge the depth of understanding latent in these traditions. Nevertheless, the imagery is so unmistakable in these traditions that each must have, at least at one time, been conversant with the movement of kundalini.

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So how do I awaken kundalini?

Indirectly kundalini can be awakened by devotion, by selfless service, or by intellectual enquiry. In these paths the blocks to the awakening of kundalini are slowly removed. Occasionally, individuals on these paths will experience a sudden awakening of kundalini but generally because the blocks are slowly and gently removed kundalini-like experiences evolve slowly in these paths.

Broadly speaking there are two radically different direct approaches to awakening kundalini. One approach requires initiation by a guru and relies upon a technique called shaktipat, or "descent of shakti." It is variously called: Siddha Mahayoga, Kundalini Mahayoga or Sahaja Yoga (Spontaneous Yoga). These approaches are treated in the [Siddha Mahayoga FAQ](#). The other approach uses intentional yogic techniques. The styles using intentional techniques include Mantra Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Laya Yoga or Kriya Yoga. These approaches are treated in the [Kundalini Yogas FAQ](#).

Fundamentally the approach of Siddha Mahayoga and the Kundalini Yogas are different. In Siddha Mahayoga the guru awakens the kundalini and after that the core of the practice is the inactive and non-willful surrender to kundalini. In Kundalini Yogas the will is used to awaken the kundalini and to guide its progress. Clearly these are different approaches. Nevertheless, elements of the each approach occur in the practices of the other. Siddha Mahayogins may use asanas, pranayamas and other hatha yoga practices. On the other hand gurus in Kundalini Yoga may give infusions of shakti to their students to help them at particular points in their practice.

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What are the advantages and disadvantages of using effort, in kundalini yogas, as opposed to the grace of the guru, in siddha mahayoga, to awaken kundalini?

Since every practitioner brings his own unique inclinations and obstacles to the practice of yoga it is very hard to generalize on this point. In terms of actually awakening kundalini gurus of Siddha Mahayoga claim that the kundalini is more easily and reliably awakened by the grace of the guru than by individual effort. In my limited experience I would agree with this assertion. While not every long-term student of either practice

necessarily shows signs of kundalini awakening it is amazing how many people have had instant awakenings of kundalini through initiation from siddha gurus.

In terms of encountering difficulties along the path the siddha gurus would also claim that fewer problems due to kundalini awakening, such as mental imbalance, are encountered by students of Siddha Mahayoga. Here I think the results are mixed. It seems to me that the guidance of the teacher in either Siddha Mahayoga or Kundalini Yoga is more a determining factor than which style of kundalini practice is employed.

Generally speaking each style of practice has its strengths and weakness. The strength of Siddha Mahayoga is the ease with which it awakens the kundalini. The weakness is that because the kundalini is so easily awakened by the guru students of Siddha Mahayoga often have completely undisciplined personal meditation practices. Time is spent instead to trying to recreate some of their initial experiences by following the guru around hoping for his or her grace. Some people spend 20 or more years in this manner without ever developing an inner core of practice or experience.

The strength of the family of Kundalini Yogas is that the progress is at least apparently more under the control of the student of the yoga. These students seem more likely to have disciplined personal practices and more of an understanding of how the practice relates to their own experience. Unfortunately for some students this leads to a fairly egotistical approach to their practice and ultimately the kundalini energy is used to bolster the ego rather than to merge the ego in bliss.

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What are the signs of an awakened kundalini?

Briefly, according to classical literature the signs of an awakened kundalini can be grouped into: mental signs, vocal signs and physical signs. Mental signs can include visions that range from ecstatically blissful to terrifyingly frightful. Vocal signs can include spontaneous vocal expressions that range from singing or reciting mantras to make various animals sounds such as growling or chirping. Physical signs include trembling, shaking and spontaneously performing hatha yoga postures and pranayamas.

From a more subjective perspective the more pleasant experiences associated with a kundalini awakening may include: waves of bliss, periods of elation, glimpses of transcendental consciousness. The less pleasant experiences associated with a kundalini awakening may include: trembling, sharp aches in areas associated with the cakras, periods of irrational anxiety, sudden flashes of heat.

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Are these methods of awakening kundalini dangerous? What about Gopi Krishna's books?

There are two different kinds of danger involved in kundalini: the inherent danger in an awakened kundalini and the danger associated with some forceful methods of awakening.

As for the inherent danger in awakening kundalini: If we take the psychological perspective and view kundalini as the power latent in our unconscious then it is easy to understand that an awakening of this force is going to bring a greater amount of unconscious material into our consciousness. Unconscious material remains unconscious precisely because it is uncomfortable to the conscious mind. Therefore, even in the best of circumstances the joy associated with the awakening of kundalini is likely to be attended with a certain amount of anxiety as kundalini wrests control from the ego and unconscious contents spill over into consciousness.

A number of different factors can ameliorate this situation. First and foremost the presence of a teacher in whom one has confidence can make a great difference. The real demonstration of the skill of a kundalini yoga teacher is more in their ability to successfully guide the student on the path of kundalini than in their ability to awaken the kundalini. A supportive environment of fellow practitioners who have undergone the

same awakening can provide comfort and confidence. Finally, a strong and resilient mind capable of coping with this sudden burst of unconscious material will see the student through any difficulties

If an individual is lacking one or more of these factors then problems can arise. In particular, individuals with a predisposition to mental illness may be susceptible to particularly challenging kundalini experiences. There are many documented cases of kundalini pushing people into psychotic episodes. Some individuals have been subsequently helped by healers or teachers while others, despite a lifetime of searching, remain tormented. The most famous case is an individual named Gopi Krishna who awakened his kundalini by doing unguided meditation on his crown cakra. His life after awakening was both blessed by ecstatic bliss and tormented by physical and mental discomfort. Eventually his experience stabilized. He wrote down his experiences in a recently re-released autobiography entitled ``Living with Kundalini." Gopi Krishna's autobiography appears to be an honest representation of his experiences but it is only one extreme datapoint in the panorama of experience on kundalini yoga. So for some there appears to be an inherent danger in awakening the kundalini but for the majority of people kundalini the initial awakening may be disruptive but the rewards soon outweigh the cost.

Some forceful methods of awakening kundalini may pose additional dangers. Without proper guidance practices involving extensive concentration or breath retention can cause mental imbalance or physical discomfort. On the other hand, techniques which work more on the flow of breath and gently moving attention seem to rarely cause problems. These techniques work more to purify the system preparing it for a kundalini awakening rather than focusing on awakening the kundalini directly.

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But even if kundalini is dangerous, isn't it a faster way to enlightenment?

First of all it may be useful to observe that there is no technique currently known on earth that appears to be rapidly catapulting large number of individuals toward enlightenment. Because kundalini yogas deal so directly with a powerful enlightening force it seems natural that they would be ``faster", but there appears to be a lot of tortoise and hare phenomena at work with newbie kundalini yogins. Many people begin kundalini yogas, have strong initial experiences and then become frightened. Many who persevere through this initial phase become distracted by the energy and focus on temporal and phenomenal applications of the energy.

There have been many scandals among kundalini yoga teachers - particularly sexual scandals. Is there a correlation between sexual scandals and kundalini yoga practice?

There have been scandals regarding the teachers of many paths, both spiritual and non-spiritual ; however, it is probably fair to say that kundalini yogins have had more than their share. Since the first publication of these frequently-asked-questions in 1994 more than one well-known kundalini yoga teacher has been implicated in having clandestine affairs with students and has been asked to step down from his position as spiritual leader as a result.

An advanced kundalini yogin is typically a powerful charismatic individual who has the ability to directly influence the minds of others. Westerners often mistake this power as a sign of enlightenment and allow such teachers liberties as a result.

In addition it is quite common for kundalini yoga to temporarily accentuate the sex drive. This period requires extra discipline. Finally, kundalini yoga is closely associated with tantrism and sex is often used in conjunction with tantric practice. Where sex is used there is of course the opportunity for misuse or abuse.

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If my kundalini is awakened will I need to change my lifestyle?

It's hard to have your cake and eat it too. If you awaken kundalini in order to change and enrich your life it's reasonable to expect you may need to change your lifestyle as a result. The recommendations of both classical literature and experience is that sleep and diet will need to be moderated otherwise severe discomfort may arise. Furthermore without moderating sexual activity and physical work it will be hard to experience much success with kundalini. The extent that these elements of your life need to change depends on the nature of the individual. While genuine mental imbalances arising from kundalini are rare nearly every kundalini yogin will find periods when one needs to be especially sensitive to needs for sleep, quiet and diet.

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Where can I learn more?

Here are some references for further reading. They may not be the easiest books to find but they are currently in print and are very good in their categories. Note that by definition no reputable book on kundalini will tell you how to awaken your kundalini. Either by effort or by shaktipat initiation, practicing kundalini yoga requires the instruction of an experienced teacher. Some introductory practices for cleansing the channels can be learned from books.

Good introductory survey:

White, John (Editor) (1990). Kundalini - Evolution and Enlightenment. New York: Paragon House.

Classical Works:

Svatmarama (1985). The Hatha Yoga Pradipika (Swami Muktibodhananda Saraswati, Trans.). (First ed.). Munger, Bihar: Bihar School of Yoga.

Silburn, L. (1988). Kundalini - Energy of the Depths (Jacques Gontier, Trans.). Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Contemporary Kundalini Yogins:

Chetanananda, S. (1991). Dynamic Stillness. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Rudra Press.

Muktananda, Swami (1989b). From the Finite to the Infinite (First ed.). Volumes I & II, South Fallsburg, NY: Siddha Yoga Dham of America Foundation.

Tirtha, Swami Vishnu (1980b). Devatma Shakti (Fifth ed.). Rishikesh: Yoga Shri Peeth Trust.

On-line materials:

There are a host of related materials now published on the Web. Since they move around the simplest thing is to simply perform an altavista search ([Altavista Search Engine](#)) on the word `kundalini."

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