

Kundalini: Awakening the Serpent Power

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Cleansing the Doors of Perception

The way we see the world depends on who we are. On the simplest level, a child walking down the street will readily spot all the toy stores, a penny-wise parent will see all the bargains displayed in shop windows, an architect will easily notice unusual buildings, and a taxi driver will be quick to spot house numbers. In each case, perception is selective, depending on the person's interest and attention. This extends to more significant aspects of life as well, such as our attitude to relationships, morality, work, leisure, health, sickness, pain, death, and the great beyond. These attitudes are shaped by all kinds of factors, karmic conditioning, as the Tantric scriptures would insist, being the most influential one.

We are shaped by our past choices, which is the same as saying that we are creatures of habit. In yogic terms, our thoughts and actions for the most part follow the path of least resistance. That is to say, they are overdetermined by the energetic template of the subtle body. This explains why it is so difficult to change our behavior even when we have realized that our old patterns are wrong, unproductive, or damaging. Hence, in addition to behavioral change, the Tantric practitioners attempt to modify the pathways of the life force directly. This modification is a matter of cleansing the *nadis*-a practice called *nadi shodhana*

As noted in the previous chapter, in the ordinary individual the energy currents exist in a state of relative defilement. They are not fully functional and therefore impede physical well-being and spiritual growth. The Tantric adept's specific goal is to open the central channel so that the life force can flow freely through it and, in due course, entice the far greater energy of the *kundalini* to follow suit.

Without prior cleansing of the *nadi* system, it is not only impossible to raise the serpent power (*kundalini-shakti*) along the axial pathway but also very dangerous to attempt to do so. For, instead of entering the central channel (*sushumna-nadi*), it is likely to force itself into the *ida*- or the *pingala-nadi* on either side of the central channel, causing immense havoc in the body and mind. This is what happened to Gopi Krishna during his spontaneous *kundalino* awakening, and his gripping account of the physical pain and mental anguish resulting from it stands as a timeless warning to all neophytes dabbling with the serpent power, or Goddess energy. He wrote:

My face became extremely pale and my body thin and weak. I felt a distaste for food and found fear clutching my heart the moment I swallowed anything . . . My restlessness had assumed such a state that I could not sit quietly for even half an hour. When I did so, my attention was drawn irresistibly towards the strange behaviour of my mind. Immediately the ever-present sense of fear was intensified, and my heart thumped violently.¹

He further described how the *kundalino* caused tremendous heat in his body "causing such unbearable pain that I writhed and twisted from side to side while streams of cold perspiration poured down my face and limbs."² He continued:

There were dreadful disturbances in all the organs, each so alarming and painful that I wonder how I managed to retain my self-possession under the onslaught. The whole delicate organism was burning, withering away completely under the fiery blast racing through its interior.

I knew I was dying and that my heart could not stand the tremendous strain for long. My throat was scorched and every part of my body flaming and burning, but I could do nothing to alleviate the dreadful suffering. If a well or river had been near I would have jumped into its cold depths, preferring death to what I was undergoing . . . I racked my distracted brain for a way of escape, only to meet blank despair on every side. The effort exhausted me and I felt myself sinking, dully conscious of the scalding sea of pain in which I was drowning.³

Other similar cases have been reported in the literature. The American psychiatrist Lee Sannella, one of the first members of the medical establishment to make an unprejudiced attempt at understanding the *kundalini* phenomenon, has suggested that the blockages in the energetic field are "stress points." As he explained in his widely read book *The Kundalini Experience*:

In the course of its upward motion, the kundalini is held to encounter all kinds of impurities that are burned off by its dynamic activity . . . In particular, the Sanskrit scriptures mention three major structural blockages, known as "knots" . . . We can look upon these blockages as stress points. Thus, in its ascent, the kundalini causes the central nervous system to throw off stress. This is usually associated with the experience of pain. When the kundalini encounters these blocks, it works away at them until they are dissolved.⁴

Sannella's statement holds true only in cases where the *kundalino* has been prematurely or wrongly aroused, that is, in the absence of adequate preparation. The Tantric scriptures emphasize the need for thorough groundwork prior to adopting any practices that aim at awakening the serpent power directly. As the fourteenth-century master Sv̄tmar̄ma states, the *kundalini* "bestows liberation on *yogins* and bondage on the ignorant."⁵ A sharp knife in the hands of a skilled physician can save a life but in the hands of a fool can do irrevocable harm. The *kundalino* in itself is neither good nor bad. It simply is the Goddess energy as it manifests in the human body. Unless we consciously collaborate with it, it remains on the most subtle level of existence, sustaining us through the agency of the life force (*pr̄bna*) but never entering our field of awareness. Through self-purification and an appropriate course of disciplines, we can benefit from it more immediately by inviting it into our life as a powerful transformative force.

In its hidden state, the *kundalini* is said to be sheer potentiality. This is only relatively correct, for the Goddess energy is always active on our behalf, maintaining all the subtle energetic processes that underlie our physical and mental structures and

functions. In its awakened state, however, the *kundalini* is an incredible agency of transformation, spiritual growth, and at last enlightenment. As the *Rudra-Yamala* (2.26.41) affirms: "The *kundalini* is ever the master of Yoga." In the same scripture (2.26.21-22), the serpent power is called the "mother of Yoga" and the "bestower of Yoga."

Various postures (*asana*) are said to effect the purification of the conduits or channels (*nadi*). The *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* (1.39) singles out the adept's posture (*siddha-asana*) as being particularly suited for this purpose, but other scriptures favor different postures. The adept's posture is practiced by placing the left heel at the rectum and the right heel above the genitals, while resting the chin on the chest and gazing at the spot between the eyebrows. Sometimes the position of the legs is reversed. The potency of this very popular posture derives from the fact that it balances the subtle energies and thereby awakens the serpent power.

While postures like the *siddha-asana* are important, the principal means of cleansing the channels is controlled breathing, as it has been elaborated in great detail in the scriptures of Hatha-Yoga. The *Gheranda-Samhita* (5.36) distinguishes between two basic types of purification practices: *samanu* and *nirmanu*, which terms denote "mental" and "nonmental" respectively. I will discuss the latter first.

As this text explains, it consists in physical cleansing processes called *dhauti*, comprising the following techniques:

1. *antar-dhauti* ("inner cleansing") consisting of the following four techniques:
 - (a) *vata-sara* ("air process"), which is done by inhaling through the mouth and expelling the air through the lower passage;
 - (b) *vari-sara* ("water process"), which is done by sipping water until the stomach is completely filled and expelling it through the lower passage;
 - (c) *vahni-sara* ("fire process"), which is done by pushing the navel one hundred times back toward the spine, which increased the "gastric fire";
 - (d) *bahish-krita* ("external action"), which is done by sucking in air through the mouth until the stomach is filled, retaining it for ninety minutes, and then expelling it through the lower passage; this is followed by one's standing in navel-deep water and pushing out the lower intestinal tract for cleansing;
2. *danta-dhauti* ("dental cleansing"), which includes cleaning the teeth, the tongue, as well as the ears and frontal sinuses;
3. *hrid-dhauti* ("lit. "heart cleansing"), which consists of (a) introducing the stalk of a plantain, turmeric, or cane into the throat to clean it out; (b) filling the stomach with water and then expelling it through the mouth; (c) swallowing a long strip of thin cloth and then pulling it out again (a process called *vaso-dhauti*, "cloth cleansing");
4. *mula-shodhana* ("rectal cleansing"), which is done by means of turmeric, water, or the middle finger;

The *samanu* type of purificatory practice consists in breath control "with seed" (*saboja*), that is, with silent *mantra* recitation. As the *Gheranda-Samhitā* (5.38-44) explains:

Seated on a seat, the *yogin* should assume the lotus posture. Next he should place the *guru* etc. [in his body],⁶ as instructed by the *guru*, and commence with the purification of the channels for purification through breath control. Contemplating the seed-syllable (*bija*) of the air element, which is energetic and of the color of smoke, the sage should inhale the air through the lunar [channel, i.e., the left nostril], repeating the seed-syllable sixteen times. Then he should retain it for sixty-four repetitions [of the seed-syllable] and exhale the air through the solar channel [i.e., the right nostril] over thirty-two repetitions. Raising the fire from the root of the navel [i.e., the *kanda*], he should contemplate the glow associated with the earth element. Then, while repeating the seed-syllable of the fire element sixteen times, he should inhale through the solar channel [i.e., the right nostril]. Next, he should retain the air for sixty-four repetitions and then exhale it through the lunar channel [i.e., the left nostril] over thirty-two repetitions. Contemplating the luminous reflection of the moon at the tip of the nose, he should inhale the air through the *ida* [i.e., left nostril] for sixteen repetitions of the seed-syllable *tham*. Then, while contemplating the nectar oozing [from the moon at the tip of the nose], he should retain the air for sixty-four repetitions of the seed-syllable *vam* and thereby cleanse the channels. Finally, he should firmly exhale for thirty-two [repetitions] of the *la*-sound.

The seed-syllables mentioned in the above passage are the root sounds associated with the four elements: *yam* for air, *ram* for fire, *lam* for earth, and *tham* for the visualized moon, which stands for the water element in its higher aspect as the nectar of immortality (*amrita*). The common seed-syllable for water is *vam*. The fifth element, "quintessence," is ether whose seed-syllable is *ham*. Although this is not mentioned in the quoted passage, oral transmission takes the ether element into account as well.

Thus the renowned Hatha-Yoga master B. K. S. Iyengar has explained the connection between breath control and the elements as follows:

In our body we have five elements. The element responsible for production of the elixir of life (prana) is earth. The element of air is used as a churning rod, through inhalation and exhalation, and distribution is through the element of ether. Ether is space, and its quality is that it can contract or expand. When you inhale, the element of ether expands to take the breath in. In exhalation, the ether contracts to push out toxins.

Two elements remain: water and fire. If there is a fire, water is used to extinguish it. This gives us the idea that fire and water are opposing elements. With the help of the elements of earth, air and ether, a friction is created between water and fire, which not only generates energy but releases it, just as water moving turbines in a hydroelectric power station produces electricity. To generate electricity, the water has to flow at a certain speed. An inadequate flow will not produce electricity. Similarly, in our system, normal breathing does not produce that intense energy. This is why we are all suffering from stress and strain, causing poor circulation which affects our health and happiness. The current is not sufficient so we are merely existing, not living.

In the practice of pranayama, we make the breath very long. In this way, the elements of fire and water are brought together, and this contact of fire and water in the body, with the help of the element of air, releases a new energy, called by yogis divine energy, or kundalini shakti, and this is the energy of prana.⁷

Other texts recommend similar procedures in which the left and the right pathway of the life force are alternately activated. According to the *Shiva-Samhita*(3.26-28), alternate breathing should be performed twenty times four times a day-at dawn, mid-day, sunset, and mid-night. If done regularly for three months, this procedure, we are told, will definitely cleanse the channels. It is only then that the practitioner should turn to breath control proper.

The *Shiva-Samhitā* (3.31-32) also states that when the *nadis* have been purified, certain signs will manifest: The body becomes harmonious (*sama*) and beautiful, and emits a pleasant scent, while the voice becomes resonant and the appetite increases. Also, the *yogin* whose subtle pathways are thoroughly cleansed is always "full-hearted," energetic, and strong. The *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* (2.19) mentions leanness and brightness of the body as indications of a purified *nadi* system. Now the practitioner is like a finely tuned instrument and ready to engage the higher processes of Tantra, leading to the activation of the serpent power. As outlined in the previous chapter, these processes range from breath control to complex rituals and visualizations, which will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. But first I must introduce the concept of the serpent power, which is at the core of Tantra-Yoga.

Awakening the Goddess Energy

As we have seen, the universe is a manifestation of the play, or transcendental polarization, between Shiva and Shakti, God and Goddess, Being and Becoming, Consciousness and Energy. In the human body, which microcosmically replicates all cosmic principles and levels of existence, the divine Energy expresses itself in two principal forms-the life force (*prana*) and the serpent power (*kundalini-shakti*).

The life force is universally present in the cosmos and as such is known as *mukhya-prana* or "primary life force." It assumes the following five functional aspects in connection with the human body, which the ancient *Chandogya-Upanishad* (2.13.6) styles the "gate keepers of the heavenly world":

1. *prana*, in the sense of the ascending vital energy that is chiefly located in the area between the navel and the heart and is linked particularly with inhalation but can stand for both inhalation and exhalation;
2. *apana*, which is the descending vital energy associated with the the lower half of the trunk and with exhalation;
3. *vyana* ("through-breath"), which is the vital energy circulating in all the limbs;

4. *udana* (lit. "up-breath"), which is connection with physiological functions such as speech and eructation, but also the ascent of attention into higher states of consciousness;

5. *samana* (lit. "mid-breath"), which is localized in the abdominal region where it is connected with the digestive process.

In addition to the above principal types of life force, some scriptures also know of five secondary types (*upaprana*), namely *naga* (lit. "serpent"), *kurma* ("tortoise"), *kri-kara* ("kri-maker"), *deva-datta* ("God-given"), and *dhanam-jaya* ("conquest of wealth"), which are respectively associated with vomiting (or eructation), blinking, hunger (or sneezing), sleep (or yawning), and decomposition of the corpse respectively.

From a yogic perspective, the two most important forms of the vital energy are *prana* and *apana*, because they are the subtle realities underlying the flow and the ebb of breathing. Breath control directly impacts on the ascending and descending current of the life force, which naturally alternates-roughly every eighty minutes-between the channel on the left (called *ida*) and the one on the right (called *pingala*) of the central pathway.⁸ The ultimate purpose of breath control is to activate the flow of *prana* through the central passage, which then draws the much more powerful energy of the *kundalini* into it.

What exactly is the *kundalini*? In answering this question, I will take my cue from Sir John Woodroffe who pondered it as long ago as 1918.⁹ As he noted, the divine Energy is polarized into a static or potential form (called *kundalini*) and a dynamic form (called *prana*). The latter is responsible for maintaining all the life processes that make embodiment possible. The former is the infinite pool of Energy coiled into potentiality at the base of the central pathway, in the lowest psychoenergetic center. This *cakra* is the normally closed plug-hole to the infinite storehouse of Energy (and Consciousness).

In his voluminous work *Tantra-Bloka* (chapter 3), the great Tantric master Abhinava Gupta distinguishes between the *purna-kundalini*, *urdhva-kundalini*, and *urdhva-kundalini*. The first is the divine power as the Whole or Plenum (*purna*); the second is the divine power in its manifestation as life energy; the third is the divine power as the awakened serpent moving upward (*urdhva*).

By means of the kinetic energy of *prana*, which is freely available in the body and its environment, the *yogin* can tap into the energetic matrix, the Goddess Power, itself. The psychoenergetic center at the base of the axial channel corresponds to the lowest level of manifestation. It is the terminal point of cosmic evolution, as powered by Shakti. Here the Goddess comes to rest in the earth element. Far from having exhausted itself, this supreme Power now simply exists as sheer potentiality awaiting its reawakening through conscious action. The Sanskrit texts speak of the *kundalini* as being "coiled up" three and a half times around the *linga*, the "sign" of Shiva. The coils have been taken to refer to the ground of nature (*prakriti*) and its three primary constituents or qualities-*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.¹⁰ This notion may be related to the Vedic teaching of Vishnu's three steps by which he crossed the entire universe. Only a being greater than the

universe can traverse it in this manner. In the case of the serpent power, this transcendence is suggested by the extra half a coil. The name *kundalini* actually means "she who is coiled" and is related to the word *kundala* denoting the kind of "earring" worn by some practitioners of Hatha-Yoga, notably members of the Kanphata sect. Some texts shorten the word to *kundalo*, while others use the term *kutilangi* ("crooked-bodied"). The coils of the *kundalino* graphically convey the notion of potentiality. For the same reason, the *Sharada-Tilaka-Tantra* (15.62) refers to the serpent power as a "lump" (*pinda*).

We can understand the evolutionary process from the transcendental plane to the earth realm through an analogous model furnished by modern cosmology. At the "time" of the Big Bang, the world existed in a state of unimaginably condensed ball of energy, sometimes called "quantum vacuum." Suddenly (and for no known reason), some fifteen billion years ago, a chain reaction occurred in this original high-energy soup which led to the creation of hydrogen atoms. This event coincided with the emergence of space and time and the gradual formation of our spatio-temporal universe, with its billions of galaxies, supernovas, black holes, and quasars, and the cold dark matter interspersed between them. Within this unimaginable vastness are planet Earth and the human species-both products of the original flash from chaos to cosmos or, in Indian terms, of Shiva's ecstatic dance.¹¹

Now scientists are busy exploring ways of freeing up the energy stored in matter by smashing high-energy subatomic particles into protons. The *yogins* are engaged in a parallel operation in the laboratory of their own body-mind. They use the vital energy to repeatedly "smash" against the blocked opening of the central pathway of the *nadi* system. The *Goraksha-Samhita* (1.47-51) describes this process very clearly:

The serpent power, forming an eightfold coil above the "bulb" (*kanda*), remains there all the while covering with its face the opening of the door to the Absolute.

Through that door the safe door to the Absolute can be reached. Covering that door with her face, the great Goddess is asleep [in the ordinary individual].

Awakened through *buddhi-yoga*¹² together with [the combined action of] mind and breath, she rises upward through the *sushumna* like a thread through a needle.

Sleeping in the form of a serpent, resembling a resplendent cord, she, when awakened by the Yoga of fire [i.e., mental concentration and breath control], rises upward through the *sushumna*.

Just as one may forcibly open a door with a key, so the *yogin* should break open the door to liberation by means of the *kundalini*.

Vimalananda, a contemporary master of the Aghoro branch of Tantra, similarly remarked that in order to arouse the *kundalini*, one must put pressure on it, and it will ascend only so long as this pressure is kept up.¹³ Perhaps tongue in cheek, he blamed gravity for its inclination to rest in or, if awakened, return as quickly as possible to the lowest psychoenergetic center of the body. In the *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* (3.111-112), we find the following stanzas:

One should arouse that sleeping serpent by seizing its tail. Then that *shakti*, awakening from her slumber, forcefully rises upward.

One should seize the reclining serpent by means of *paridhana*¹⁴ and, while inhaling through the solar channel, every day cause her to stir for about ninety minutes, both morning and evening.

The practice mentioned here is known as *shakti-calana* ("stirring the power"). It is done by contracting the sphincter muscle and by applying the throat lock (*jalandhara-bandha*) while holding the breath, which causes the *prana* and *apana* to mix and "combust," thereby driving the life force upward into the central channel. *Manthana* ("churning") is another term used in the texts to describe the process of forcing *prana* and *apana* to "combust" by means of breath retention (*kumbhaka*) and most intense concentration. The Kashmiri *yogini* Lalla hints at this process in one of her mystical poems:

Closing the doors and windows of my body, I seized the thief, *prana*, and shut him in. I bound him tightly inside the chamber of my heart, And lashed him hard with the whip *om*.¹⁵

I pulled the reins of the steed of the mind; I compressed the life force circulating through the ten channels; Then, indeed, did the lunar particle (*shashi-kalā*) melt and dissolve, and the Void merged with the Void.¹⁶

Concentrating on the *om*-sound, I made my body like blazing coal. Leaving behind the six crossroads, I travelled the path of Truth. And then I, Lalla, reached the Abode of Light.¹⁷

The earlier image of seizing the serpent by the tail is characteristic of the forceful (*hatha*) approach of Hatha-Yoga. Some traditional authorities might find it disrespectful to speak of the divine Shakti in this manner, while others would object to the idea that one can coerce the Goddess and obtain her liberating grace by mechanical means.

All are agreed, however, that the serpent energy must ascend along the central pathway, which is also called the "great path" (*maha-patha*) and "cremation ground" (*smashana*) because it alone leads to liberation. In keeping with this typically Tantric symbolism, the *Gheranda-Samhita* (3.45) specifies that the *yogin* engaged in this esoteric practice should besmear his body with ashes, which is an outward sign of his internal renunciation of all worldly things and desires. The adept who seeks to arouse the *kundalini* must be prepared to die, because this process quite literally anticipates the death process. As the serpent power rises along the central passage, the *yogin's* microcosm is gradually dissolved. I will deal with this process shortly, though first I want to mention Abhinava Gupta's concept of *prana-danda-prayoga* or the "process of making the life force like a rod (*danda*)."

A cobra is dangerous only when it is coiled, ready to strike in an instant. However, when its body is completely erect it is quite harmless. Similarly, the *kundalini* is dangerous only in its form of the diffuse life energies, which fuel the unilluminated person's hankering for sensory and sensual experiences, entangling him or her ever more in worldly

karmas. When the serpent power is erect, however, it is not poisonous but a source of ambrosia, because it is erect only when it has entered the central pathway leading to liberation and bliss. As Jayaratha explains in his commentary on the *Tantra-Bloka* (chapter 5, p. 358), when one strikes a serpent it draws itself up and becomes stiff like a rod. Similarly, through the process of "churning," the *kundalini* stretches upward into the perpendicular pathway of the *sushumna*, reaching with its head for the topmost psychoenergetic center.

The ascent of the Goddess power in the body is associated with the progressive dissolution of the elements—a process that is called *laya-krama* ("process of dissolution") or *laya-yoga* ("discipline of dissolution"). In the present context, the technical term *laya* refers to the resorption of the elements into the pretemporal and prespatial ground of nature (*prakriti-pradhana*). That this esoteric process has often been misunderstood can be gathered from the following comments in the *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika* (4.34):

They say "*laya, laya,*" but what is the nature of *laya*? *Laya* is non-remembrance of the sense objects because the tendencies (*vbsanb*) do not arise again.

This stanza from the pen of the adept Svatmarama indicates that the yogic process of microcosmic dissolution brings about a dramatic change in the mind, for it wipes clean karmic seeds stored in the subconscious. This is the purpose of all higher processes of Yoga, for only when the karmic seeds are burnt completely is their future germination rendered impossible and liberation ensured. But Svatmarama's comments do not tell us how this Tantric process actually occurs. The *Tantras* are little more communicative on this point, which is one of the many experientially based truths of Tantra-Yoga.

In principle, *laya* is effected as the *kundalini* rises from center to center. Its arrival causes each center to vibrate intensely and to function fully, but as it goes to the next higher psychoenergetic center, the departure of the Goddess power leaves the previous center or centers as if void. The reason for this is that at each center, Shakti works the miracle of a profound purification of the elements (called *tattva*), rendering them extremely subtle. More precisely, their vibration is speeded up to the most subtle level of nature (*prakriti*), and hence they are said to have become reabsorbed into the cosmic matrix. The intelligent Goddess power henceforth—or at least for the period of *kundalini* arousal—takes over their respective functions.

This esoteric process is the basis for the *bhuta-shuddhi* ritual in which the elements are visualized as being purified through their progressive absorption into the divine Shakti. This practice is done prior to visualizing oneself as one's chosen deity (*ishta-devata*) and doing ritual worship. The earth element governs the area between the feet and the thighs; the water element has authority over the area between the thighs and the navel; the fire element rules the zone between the navel and the heart; the air element reigns over the section between the heart and the forehead; the ether element governs the area above the forehead. The practitioner visualizes earth dissolving into water, water into fire, fire into air, air into ether, and then ether into the higher principles (*tattva*) until everything is dissolved into the Goddess power itself.

Thus the *yogin* starts out as an impure being (*papa-purusha*) and through the power of visualization recreates himself as a pure being, a worthy vessel for the divine Power. Through the *kundalini* process, this visualized pure body-mind then becomes actuality, for the ascent of the serpent power through the axial pathway of the body recapitulates the mental process of *bhuta-shuddhi*, literally changing the body's chemistry. Through repeated practice of *kundalini-yoga*, the Tantric adepts succeed in speeding up the vibration of their body permanently, leading to the creation of the much-desired "divine body" (*divya-deha*).

The language of vibration is by no means modern but is integral to the vocabulary of Tantra, particularly the Tantric schools of Kashmir. The idiom of vibration has been developed in great detail by the philosopher-*yogins* of the Spanda school. According to them, everything is vibration—the elements, their subtle templates, the sense objects, the life force, the *cakras*. Even the ultimate Shakti itself is vibratory in nature, though its vibration is, in contemporary terms, "translocal." The Spanda thinkers speak of this as a "quasi-vibration." But they insist that we must assume the transcendental Shakti to be dynamic, as otherwise there is no plausible explanation for the existence of the world or the fact that it is constantly changing. An analogous concept, which it might be helpful to evoke here, is physicist David Bohm's "holomovement," which is essentially undefinable and immeasurable.¹⁸ This coinage refers to the ultimate foundation of all "implicate orders," that is, the multiply enfolded reality mirrored in each of its parts.

Similarly, the *kundalini* is the ultimate, translocal vibration-Shakti-impacting more directly on the space-time continuum in the form of the *yogin's* localized body-mind. Its supervibration radically transmutes the constituents of the body-mind, ultimately creating a divinized body (*divya-deha*) endowed with extraordinary capacities that transcend the laws of nature as we know it.

The earth element, which is connected with the lowest psychoenergetic center, is dissolved into its energetic potential of smell (*gandha-tanmatra*). This is conducted by the rising *kundalini* to the second psychoenergetic center, where the Goddess power next dissolves the water element into its energetic potential of taste (*rasa-tanmatra*). This subtle product is elevated to the level of the psychoenergetic center at the navel. Here the *kundalini* transmutes the fire element into its energetic potential of sight (*rupa-tanmatra*). This distillate is then taken to the level of the heart center where the *kundalini* effects the transmutation of the wind element into its energetic potential of touch (*sparsha-tanmatra*). This subtle form of the wind element is next raised to the level of the throat center where the *kundalini* refines the ether element into its energetic potential of sound (*shabda-tanmatra*). This product of yogic alchemy is conducted to the level of the *ajna-cakra* in the middle of the head, and here the lower mind (*manas*) is dissolved into the higher mind (*buddhi*), which, in turn, is dissolved into the subtle matrix of nature (*sukshma-prakriti*). The final phase of dissolution occurs when the serpent power reaches the topmost psychoenergetic center, when the subtle matrix of nature is dissolved into the *para-bindu*, which is the into the supreme point of origin of

the individuated body-mind. Dissolution (*laya*) is fundamental to Tantra-Yoga. Hence we can read in the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra* (9.36):

Ten million rituals of worship equal one hymn; ten million hymns equal one recitation [of a *mantra*]; ten million recitations equal one meditation; ten million meditations equal a single [moment of] absorption (*laya*).

Thus, in her ascent toward the crown center, the *kundalini-shakti* invigorates the various *cakras* and then causes them to shut down again. But this shut-down differs from the earlier state of minimal function in the ordinary person. For, the *cakras* of the adept are no longer closed down because of impurities (or karmic obstructions) but because their energy has been transmuted.. Hence when the *kundalini* returns to its resting-place at the base of the spine, the *cakras* resume their respective functions but in a far more integrated or harmonious way.

As soon as the *kundalini* pierces the center in the mid-brain-the *ajna-cakra*-she assumes a new form of existence and becomes *cit-kundalini* or the "serpent of Consciousness." This event is accompanied by the great bliss of nondual realization. This bliss, arising from the union of the Shakti with Lord Shiva, extends throughout the body while yet transcending it.

Along the route, the ascending *kundalini* may produce all kinds of physiological and mental phenomena, which are all the result of incomplete identification with the Goddess power and a certain attachment to the body. The *Tantras* mention startled jumping (*udbhava* or *pluti*), trembling (*kampana*), whirling sensation (*ghurni*), drowsiness (*nidra*), as well as ecstatic feelings (*ananda*) that are not, however, of the same magnitude or significance as the supreme bliss of transcendental realization.

The ascent of the serpent power through the six principal "wheels" of the body is technically called *shat-cakra-bhedana* or "piercing the six centers." This curious expression is explained by the fact that in the ordinary individual, the *cakras* are undeveloped and more like knots (*granthi*) than beautiful lotus flowers. The awakened *kundalini* breaks them open, disentangles their energies, vitalizes and balances them. Three of the *cakras* represent a particular challenge to the *yogin*. Thus the Tantric and non-Tantric scriptures mention three knots at the base of the spine, the throat, and the "third eye." They are called *brahma-*, *vishnu-*, and *rudra-granthi* respectively, after the deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudra (= Shiva).

The goal of Tantra is to have the *kundalini* remain permanently elevated to the topmost psychoenergetic center, which state coincides with liberation. At the beginning, however, the *kundalini* will tend to return to the *cakra* at the base of the spine, because the body-mind is not yet adequately prepared. Therefore the practitioner must repeatedly invite the Goddess power to unite with her divine spouse, Shiva, at the top of Mount Kailasa, that is, in the *sahasrara-cakra*. This will gradually remove the karmic inclination toward identifying with the body-mind rather than Shiva-Shakti as one's ultimate identity. In Kashmiri Tantra, this ever-blissful transcendental identity is called

aham ("I") versus the finite ego (*ahamkara*, "I-maker"), which is driven by the desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain and yet continuously sows the seeds of suffering. Tantra-Yoga aims at dissolving the illusion of being a separate finite entity, and it does so by means of the union of the *kula-kundalini* with the transcendental principle of *akula*, or Shiva. When this is accomplished there is nothing that is not realized as utterly blissful. Even the body, previously experienced as a material lump (*pinda*), is seen to be supremely conscious and suffused with the nectar of bliss and at one with all other bodies and with the universe itself.

Under the influence of Shakti, the body's chemistry starts to change and looks transfigured to the eyes of outside observers. It becomes increasingly radiant, manifesting the supreme Consciousness-Bliss (*cid-ananda*). The Tantric adept literally becomes a beacon of Light in the world.

Notes

1 G. Krishna, *Kundalini: Evolutionary Energy in Man* (London: Robinson & Watkins, 1971), p. 54. This edition has an excellent psychological commentary by James Hillman.

2 Ibid., p. 62.

3 Ibid., p. 65.

4 L. Sannella, *The Kundalini Experience* (Lower Lake, Cal.: Integral Publishing, 1992), p. 31.

5 *Hatha-Yoga-Pradipikā* 3.107.

6 This is the practice of *nyasa*.

7 B. K. S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 1989), p. 127.

8 This alternation can easily be tested, because it opens the left and the right nostril respectively, with a short period of free flow through both nostrils. It is possible to change the flow simply by putting pressure on the armpit of the side that one wants to activate. The flow of vital energy is also used for diagnostic and divinatory purposes, and this craft is known as *svarodaya-vijnāna* ("knowledge of the rising of the sound [of the breath]").

9 See Arthur Avalon (Sir John Woodroffe), *Shakti and Shukta* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978), pp. 694ff. This volume was first published sixty years earlier.

10 See, e.g., the *Shradh-Tilaka-Tantra* (25.78). Sometimes eight coils are spoken of, and various explanations have been given for them.

11 Interestingly, the common Sanskrit name for the ultimate Reality is *brahman*, which is derived from the verbal *brih* meaning "to grow." In the *Upanishads*, the world is described as emerging out of the indescribable, unqualified brahman, which affords a parallel to the Big Bang model of creation. The original quantum vacuum or foam is also indescribable, since—like the *brahman*—it transcends space and time; yet out of it sprang in logical sequence the entire universe.

12 *Buddhi-yoga* can mean "mental discipline" or, more specifically, "unitive discipline by means of the higher mind."

13 See R. E. Svoboda, *Aghora II: Kundalini* (Albuquerque, N.M.: Brotherhood of Life, 1993), p. 72.

14 The use of the term *paridhṛva* in the present context is curious. It means "putting on" or "surrounding" and here is meant to convey the idea of agitation. Some commentators understand it as a synonym for *naulo*, which is performed by rolling the abdominal rectus muscles clockwise and counterclockwise.

15 This is poem 31 in the edition by B. N. Parimoo, *The Ascent of Self* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978).

16 This is poem 42 in B. N. Parimoo, *op. cit.*

17 This is poem 53 in B. N. Parimoo, *op. cit.*

18 See D. Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 150ff.

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