

KUNDALINI - a personal approach

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"I am the flame that burns in every heart of man,
and in the core of every star.
I am Life, and the giver of Life; yet therefore is
the knowledge of me the knowledge of Death. "

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Introduction

The Awakening of the Kundalini or Fire-Snake is a central feature of contemporary Magick, which has assimilated the concept from its original Tantrik source. Although the concept of Kundalini was first introduced to Western occultists by Theosophists such as Alice Bailey and C.W. Leadbeater, it took the more detailed writings of Arthur Avalon and Aleister Crowley to launch significant numbers of Western occultists in search of this experience. It was Crowley in particular who provided a synthesis of Western and Eastern magickal practices, and left for future occultists an integrated approach towards Kundalini experience, identifying it as the central 'magickal power' in the human organism. Crowley's (enthusiastic) experiments with both drugs and sexual magick were a far cry from the "spiritual asceticism" expounded by many of his contemporaries. While "spirituality" was generally seen in terms of philosophies that reject the bodily or somatic experience, Crowley laid the foundations of a Western approach to development which integrated both the psychic and somatic areas of experience. It was not until the 1960's, and the arrival of the "Psychedelic Era" that such an approach received widespread (and serious) attention. The 1960's ushered in the beginnings of what Timothy Leary terms "hedonic technology" - the discovery of pleasure over restriction via drugs, sexuality, dance, music, massage, yoga and diet. The "Psychedelic Era" also brought with it a great "Occult Revival", with particular interest in hedonistically orientated magick, such as Tantra and Crowley's cult of Thelema.

Out of this explosion in consciousness came the developments in magickal thought and practice of the 1970's, particularly Kenneth Grant's exposition of Crowley, Tantric doctrine and the works of Austin Osman Spare. Thelemically-oriented magazines such as Sothis, Agape and The New Equinox provided focal points for the evolution of magickal techniques and considerations. Awareness of the physiological nature of intense states of consciousness was growing, and magick was increasingly becoming viewed as an approach to development that integrated both inner, mental experience and bodily awareness. The placing of "potentia" was within the individual rather than any external power.

Since the 1960's, The "awakening" of Kundalini has become an experience that many Westerners seek. Magick is one of the major routes, yoga another, also ecstatic cults presided over by various gurus. There is a great deal of information written on the subject, ranging from extremely technical writers such as Kenneth Grant, to popular works on Kundalini-Yoga and Tantrik-derived sex-manuals. Like many other occult subjects, there are now many books written "from the armchair", where a writer perpetuates a particular view of a subject, rather than writing from direct experience. This has led to much confusion and misconception concerning the whole nature of Kundalini and its attendant experience. The power of the experience to transform consciousness in varying degrees seems to be almost universally recognised, but some writers warn against practising Kundalini yoga, whilst others give the impression that little more is required than a few basic yoga asanas, and a willing partner of the (usually) opposite sex. Is your Kundalini rising or are you just pleased to see me?

Personal Experience

So what is meant by the term Kundalini experience? Kundalini is a Sanskrit word that can be translated as "coiled up". Kundalini is represented in many Tantrik illustrations as a sleeping serpent, coiled $3\frac{1}{2}$ times, at the base of the spinal cord. The popular view of Kundalini is that it is a dormant power that lies waiting to be unleashed, by means of various practices. The "serpent power", once awakened, is coaxed up the central channel of the spine, entering the chakras (psychic energy centres) until it reaches the Crown chakra - and the yogi achieves "illumination".

Sounds straightforward, doesn't it? But the Kundalini experience is a much more complex phenomenon. There seems to be no general consensus view of Kundalini, once one begins to delve into the subject. Western scientists and Eastern mystics, ancient sages and modern researchers - all have produced widely-varying explanations of what Kundalini is all about.

As with any other kind of "occult" experience, the most useful way to proceed is from personal experience; and for Kundalini - direct experience of it changed my attitude towards it (and many other things besides) and set me on the track of finding my own answers.

When I first encountered the subject of Kundalini, in the writings of Kenneth Grant and Gopi Krishna, I developed the misconception that this was something to definitely avoid until I was "more advanced" as regards magickal and yoga abilities. So what happened? - I had a Kundalini experience. Shock-Horror! It came following a long period of Bhakti-yoga upon the goddess Kali, which culminated in a vivid "death-rebirth" vision of being burned alive on a stone slab, then being remade anew.

The Kundalini experience occurred seven days later. I had been experiencing acute discomfort

all day, without being able to pinpoint any particular source. In the evening, I was meditating with the Priestess Raven. Suddenly I experienced what I can only describe as a fit - muscles went into spasm, my teeth began chattering, I felt hot and cold flushes, and, with spine arching backwards, began to hyperventilate. Raven held me down and helped me to relax and "go with it". The "fit" lasted for about twenty minutes, and as it faded I felt quite weak and dizzy. Raven, a qualified yoga teacher with over 20 years of experience in Hatha and Raja yoga, remarked that she thought it was "the Serpent beginning to shift".

This occurrence was abrupt, extremely physical, and beyond my conscious volition. All the preconceptions I had about Kundalini (and about being in control of experience) were suddenly shattered. Underneath all the confusion though, there was an intuitive certainty that what was happening was "right".

Over the next 28 days, both the Priestess Raven and I experienced "acute" Kundalini activity - characterised by muscular spasms around the base of the spine, euphoria, out-of-the-body experiences and hallucinations. Here is a report of one of the most disorientating experiences (5/10/84, beginning approx. 11.30 p.m.):

".....it began as a scream in my head "Kali's scream " I thought. It echoed on and on, for what seemed like forever, until I no longer heard it but felt it and saw it - a white light which shot down my spine into the base chakra, which opened with a blaze. A cold sensation spread slowly around my body - it felt like each individual nerve was alight. A very "jarring" sense of dissociation built up. When I closed my eyes, this rapidly became a sensation of whirling at high speed, accompanied by swirling patterns of colour. I was soon oblivious of other people in the room, and adopted the lotus asana as the best posture to keep myself "together" . This went on for over an hour."

Roughly at the same time, the Priestess Raven experienced a vision of Kali, coupled with a feeling of extreme rage. She "heard" wolves howling, and her cat became terrified of her and would not approach her.

Once the acute phase of Kundalini had abated, we then had to try and make some sense of it, which led me to examine Kundalini in a new perspective.

The first point to be made is that Kundalini isn't an isolated area of occult experience. Though it is often written about in a way that suggests this. That Kundalini can be "awakened" through a variety of techniques such as yoga, dancing, drumming, intense devotion (Bhakti), sexual asanas, various meditations and use of psychoactive agents indicates that it is a core feature of magickal/transformational experience. When I had my first acute Kundalini experience, I hadn't been working for such an event, so it must have been "triggered" by other factors.

A close study of Tantric texts reveals that Kundalini is, rather than being a dormant "potentia" - sleeping until consciously raised, a kind of organising principle that maintains systems in equilibrium at all scales - from the subatomic to the cosmic. In the SAT-CAKRA-NIRUPANA text, Kundalini is referred to as the "world-bewilderer" - the root of the physical world. Kundalini is seen as a particular form of Shakti (energy) with dominion over matter. "Coiled" Kundalini is often referred to as "sleeping" - but sleeping as in the sense of Sushupti - the thought-free state of no-mind. It is coiled Kundalini which maintains the physical universe. The activity of Kundalini in individual systems (i.e. organic beings) is guided by the Jivatman - the embodied life-spark. To use a holographic analogy, the Jivatman is a holographic encoding within each individual system to replicate the holoverse, or Brahman in Tantrika. It is the Jivatman which carries the evolutionary "program" for each individual entity. So it is the Jivatman which "rules" Kundalini activity, not the "earthbound" ego-complex. This could account for the many instances where individuals pursue Kundalini experiences through yoga and other means without ever getting any spectacular results; while the sceptic next door can have a powerful "bliss" experience whilst hanging out the washing!

Many Eastern yogis do in fact warn Western students against trying to consciously "raise" Kundalini as a specific end. Sri Aurobindo's "Integral Yoga" in particular, is concerned with "living appropriately" and transformation within the physical world, rather than rejecting it. Integral Yoga is not concerned with seeking "liberation" from existence, but fulfilment within the world, whereby the Kundalini rises "in its own time".

This idea bears out my own experience. The only times when I have used exercises specifically designed to affect the Kundalini (such as Crowley's Liber SSS) is during periods of acute Kundalini activity, when the experience became too disorientating. Any kind of occult practice or powerful transformational event will affect the Kundalini. It "awakens" when conditions in the system it organises become conducive to its arousal.

Many models which seek to explain the phenomena of Kundalini posit the existence of cosmic inner planes and psychic centres - the chakras. Kundalini, in these systems, is conceptualised as a "spiritual awakening". Fair enough, but such models as expressed by Western authors (such as C.W. Leadbeater and Alice Bailey) tend to maintain the spiritual-mundane, mind-body division, exhorting students to reject the material and seek the "spiritual" life. I find this idea somewhat suspect, preferring not to make such distinctions. At the time of the initial Kundalini experience, I was studying neurological medicine and consequently became interested in evolving a neurological (and later, Neuromagickal) model of Kundalini activity.

Trigger Factors

Indescribing the onset of intense states of awareness, many people use the word "trigger" to attempt to explain how the experience came about. Trigger factors do not cause the experience in the usual linear fashion, but somehow facilitate it. When such an event occurs spontaneously, we can only perceive it, and are not aware of the microscopic patterns of which it is the peak. The trigger to a Bliss/Kundalini experience could be the final push which allows all the various microscopic interactions in the individual system to pass a critical threshold, thus bringing about a change in awareness.

Bliss researcher Nona Coxhead has investigated trigger factors in transcendental experiences and outlined some commonly-occurring situations:

Listening to music	Sensation	Suicidal feelings
Response to nature	Relief from emotional pressure	News of terminal illness
Childbirth	Achievement	Grief or loss
Sports	Acceleration	Life-threatening situations
Devotion and worship	Happiness	Clinical death

To these can be added the techniques of yoga and magick - the various ways of achieving gnosis; protracted bodily exercises such as Hatha Yoga or T'ai Chi; visualisation; ritual magick; contemplation; meditation; use of drugs, and others. The transformative experience (of which Kundalini is one conceptualisation) can occur spontaneously, or in relation to a systematised set of practices.

Intense emotional arousal, any technique to focus awareness upon one stimulus, and extreme physiological states appear to be key factors. Kundalini-related experiences are intensely bodily-oriented, with subjects reporting muscle spasms, spatial disorientation, and feelings of being filled with energy. Many people, such as Gopi Krishna, report strange sensations around the base of the spine - the site of the root-chakra Muladhara (root-support). Kundalini is often spoken of in poetic or mystical terms as moving up the spinal canal, entering the spinal chakras in turn. I personally, however, am more interested in what could be happening within the Central Nervous System.

During periods of intense Kundalini-arousal I experienced great "rushes" of energy moving up the spine. Looking at what occurred during such episodes in physiological terms, I was struck by two points: Firstly, that my body seemed to be showing the kind of involuntary muscle patterns displayed during orgasm - only much more pronounced; and secondly, showing an extreme stimulation of the autonomic nervous system - hence the hot and cold flushes, for instance. Just because one feels "strange sensations" at the base of the spine does not necessarily mean what is occurring originates in that area. Kundalini arousal could be an entirely neurological event which gives rise to a variety of bodily sensations.

So how does this relate to trigger factors? The kinds of predisposing factors outlined above all have a powerful effect on the human nervous system. It is interesting to note that many ways of achieving gnosis are also used in torture and brainwashing - such as sensory deprivation, sleeplessness, fasting and pain. Aldous Huxley, in his book Heaven and Hell (1956) points out how the spiritual disciplines of mystics affected their biosystems:

"...it is a matter of historical record that most contemplatives worked systematically to alter their body chemistry, with a view to creating the internal conditions favourable to spiritual insight. When they were not starving themselves into low blood sugar and vitamin deficiency, they were beating themselves into intoxication by histamine, adrenalin and decomposed protein in uncomfortable positions in order to create the psycho-physical symptoms of stress"

It does appear to be the case that some psychotechnologies (such as magick) replicate, in a more controlled and volitional manner, the kind of intense states of arousal brought on by emotional stresses. Emotional arousal brings about fluctuations in both endocrine and nervous systems to such an extent that the changes can become a permanent pattern, with subsequent effects on perception, thought patterns and behaviour. Perhaps, in terms of Kundalini-type experience, the trigger factor(s) relate to the individual's current neurological state at the time of the experience's onset. The trigger factor for my first Kundalini experience was a dyadic meditation performed with Raven, aimed at blanking out the mind. Predisposing factors could be both long-term influences such as general and magickal development, and more "recent" influences such as the developing relationship between Raven and myself, the prolonged Bhakti on Kali and the death-rebirth vision, and work stresses. I don't believe that such experiences happen "by accident", but that the patterns leading up to them are not always immediately obvious.

The neurological basis of meditation has been well-researched by neuroscientists, who have produced some intriguing accounts of how meditative techniques affect the brain. In particular there is the phenomenon of "habituation". Habituation is a neural response to the repetition of one particular stimulus. Focussing awareness on a single input (be it a visual or mental image, sound, chant or pattern of ritualised movement) dampens down sensory input and serves to inhibit the activity of the cerebral cortex. A simple example of habituation at work occurs when you go into a room in which there is a clock ticking. At first it is a new stimulus so you will hear it clearly. Eventually, especially if your attention is taken up by something else, you "stop" hearing it. The neurones firing in response to the clock ticking have effectively become "bored" and the sound slips below conscious awareness. Inhibition of cortical neuronal activity leads to the "inward-turning" of awareness. The habituation response is mediated from a group of cells in the brainstem known as the reticular activating system,

the R.A.S.. This group of cells serves to "censor" sensory input so that only "meaningful" stimuli reach the cerebral cortex (which relates to conscious awareness). A similar state can be induced by intense emotional arousal or shock, as if all inputs are momentarily "frozen" by the R.A.S..

Awakening the Kundalini

As noted earlier, Kundalini awakens in its "own" time - when the human biosystem/bodymind complex reaches a certain critical threshold. Some modern researchers into Kundalini experiences are trying to understand this process in terms of the build-up of key levels of chemical transmitter substances (both endocrine gland secretions and neurotransmitter substances) which relate to the physical and emotional stresses that the individual is undergoing. An allied theory is that of "neural coherence". This theory posits that conscious experience is generated by the highly complex activity of millions of neurons in the brain. Conscious experience depends on the coherence and patterning of this activity. The more ordered the neural activity across the cerebral cortex, the stronger (more intense) the conscious experience.

We know that a great deal of information processing within the brain does not reach waking consciousness. Two factors that mediate this selection of stimuli could be the reticular system discussed above, and the level of "noise" in the brain. Noise, in cybernetic terms, is random background activity as opposed to coherent "signals". A high degree of noise across the cortex means that the individual is only aware of the strongest signals, such as sensory information. Signals that are less strong will be masked by the noise. Any kind of situation which "clears" the cortex of a large degree of stimulus input reduces the general level of neural noise. Any kind of activity which produces the kind of neural activity characterised by the habituation response therefore reduces neural noise. As this occurs, patterns of neural activity that are usually masked by noise come into conscious awareness. In other words, we become aware of more subtle aspects of experience which do not necessarily depend on our space-time bound senses. This could include psychic perceptions, and the core mystic experience of being enmeshed within a large "whole" - be it characterised as God, the Tao, or Chaos. Also, we become aware of aspects of somatic experience that do not normally pass the threshold of awareness.

A difficulty with using "spiritual" models of Kundalini-type experiences is that it is often difficult to account for "spontaneous" experiences (such as happened to Gopi Krishna) and also, drug-induced states. Basing all such experiences within a neurological framework is not merely an exercise in reductionism, but an attempt to provide a basis of understanding which includes these two situations (and others).

Many self-proclaimed authorities decry the idea that drug-induced states are as powerful (in spiritual terms) as those attained through more long-term techniques. Writers on the occult often warn against using drugs as a "spiritual short-cut". However, research into LSD and similar agents indicates that subjects do, as a result of drug-induced experience, go through the profound life-changes, change in aspirations and "spiritual" awakening that occurs as a result of more orthodox disciplines, or traumatic life-events. However, an American researcher, W.N.Pankhe, notes that:

"The hardest work may come after the experience, in the effort to integrate the experience with everyday life"

This is probably true for "trippers" who do not have a coherent belief-system with which to make sense of the experience - witness the number of "acid casualties" who end up as born-again Christians ! The statement is also true for those who have "spontaneous" experiences.

The major distinction between the drug-induced experience and the "disciplined" approach is that the latter is much slower, usually more controlled. Moving back to the "critical threshold" hypothesis at the beginning of this section, I would suggest that psychotechnologies such as magick or yoga, over time produce changes in the human biosystem that eventually trigger the Kundalini experience. These changes relate to the establishment of patterns of neural cohesiveness - so that the practitioner becomes increasingly aware of the subtler aspects of experience and changes in other internal systems. Long practice of breath control, for example, lowers the CO₂ level in the blood, which also "smooths out" cerebral activity across the cortex. Although the hardware of body organs doesn't change, the software does: i.e. the patterns of neural activity, chemical messengers, and transport of vital substances. All these factors can equally, of course, be affected by life-stresses, emotional trauma and repeated drug experience.

In these terms, Kundalini could be an organising principle that maintains the harmonious interaction of all human biosystems. When we become more aware of it, we are becoming more receptive to the internal dynamics of our own systems and at the same time, opening (as Aldous Huxley put it) the "Doors of Perception". It's less that we "awaken" Kundalini, more that Kundalini awakens us. The riot of body-systems going into extreme activity often experienced as a part of early Kundalini "shifts" could be a result of the progressive software changes discussed above. It could represent a "peak" in the internal evolution of the bodymind complex, establishing new patterns of neural organisation in the brain. In subjective terms, this replaces previous "imprints" about the world and ourselves with the awakening of intuitive faculties, psychic perception, creativity, new aspirations and a sense of being a part of a greater whole.

I do feel that my own Kundalini experience in 1984 marked the turning-point in my own development. I had to throw out many previously-held conceptions and learn to listen to and trust my own intuition. Acute peaks in Kundalini activity since that time have not been so disorientating, but have still released further potentia for activity and creative output. Indeed, during such periods of activity, I have found that the best way for me to manage the

energy is to direct it towards some kind of project, rather than "bottling it up" with meditation and yogic asanas.

Kundalini and Evolution

Kundalini activity in Tantrik cosmology relates to the evolution of physical forms, the maintenance of the physical universe, and the spiritual evolution of entities in their return to Brahma - the noumenal source. It is the Jivatman, the spark of Brahman within each individual, which carries the instructions for our spiritual evolution.

Some Western scientists now regard the DNA-RNA structure as the genetic equivalent of the Jivatman. The suggestion has been made that the capacity to have Kundalini and similar experiences is encoded at the genetic level. Surprisingly, this hypothesis has come from research into schizophrenia. Research in the last ten years into the various syndromes collectively referred to as schizophrenia indicates that the subjective states reported by sufferers of the illness are similar, in many ways, to those reported by individuals undergoing "mystical" experiences. An individual's liability to develop schizophrenia is partially genetically determined. It has been said that schizophrenia is a gun primed by genetic factors, loaded by upbringing, and fired by some kind of trigger experience. Why such genes have survived is a puzzle, but it could be that the same genes which predispose towards schizophrenia also mediate the internal evolution of consciousness. Mystically-oriented commentators on schizophrenia such as R.D. Laing and Jung have drawn attention to the links between madness and the psychic-transformative journey. However, while the magician or shaman is "swimming", the schizophrenic is "drowning". If the genetic coding of such experience is the case, then there are a multitude of other factors which impinge on the individual to facilitate neurological evolution - "illumination", neurological systems "crash"- schizophrenia, or many shades of either extreme.

Many people now believe that the next evolutionary step for humanity will be the evolution of consciousness. This is extant in current magickal ideas such as the "gestalt consciousness" of the Maat Current, and in "new age" scientific paradigms as developed by Rupert Sheldrake (Morphogenetic Fields), David Bohm (Holoverse), and Timothy Leary (S.M.I²:L.E. formula). Leary's 8-circuit model of neurological evolution in particular provides another way of interpreting the kind of process I have discussed. Briefly, Leary's theory states that since the design of the nervous system is encoded within the DNA-RNA structure, then the evolution of human beings in neurological terms is also contained therein. As the individual develops, there occur critical periods during which the brain accepts imprints which then become core elements of subsequent learning. The first four circuits ensure genetic transmission and variability, establishing humanity as a continuing species. The next four circuits are the DNA-RNA "keys" to species evolution and adaptation. These "higher" circuits are opened when internal conditions are conducive. They represent states of consciousness which, after a certain intensity of experience is reached (either by repeated access to them or by a very powerful single experience), become hard-wired programs - a new basic reality from which the individual acts. Once a circuit "opens" in this way, it becomes a powerful motivator for further development. For example, once bodily rapture (circuit V) has been experienced, it gives the individual a foretaste of what is beyond the basic survival circuits and their attendant conditioning. This could spur the individual on to accessing and imprinting the "higher" circuits.

This sounds similar to the Kundalini cycle, doesn't it? It is certainly an area which merits further investigation, and some magicians are now turning to neurologically-based models to integrate and understand their experiences.

Conclusions

Although much of what is presented here is done so from a scientific viewpoint, much of it is built from very tenuous findings - there is still a long way to go in understanding Kundalini in neurological terms. It's a start, however. My own attitude towards Kundalini remains on the lines of - "Well, it happens, and then I have to integrate and evaluate the experience after it passes". I still don't work actively for Kundalini experience, since I now hold the view that any kind of magickal work will do this, and I find it more appropriate to work for specific projects and goals. Peaks in Kundalini activity with their attendant changes in awareness do result in the kind of new imprints that Leary is talking about. I have tended to find that whatever "map" of this experience you impose over it - whether this be Leary's model, Qabalistic power-zones, Hindu chakras or Taoist chi-zones, the experience will fit them. This leads me to feel even more that the brain is the central area of the Kundalini experience. Kundalini is, indeed, the root magickal power, since it is the potentia which can take us, once we are aware of it, beyond the limitations of cultural conditioning and space-time.

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