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THE YOGIC BODY IN GLOBAL TRANSMISSION

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Introduction

The practices discussed in this chapter (including yoga, cakra, Kūṇḍalini and Kūṇḍalini yoga) are highly complex and historically entrenched. By themselves or in combination, each brings forth materials that are not only rich in content but also provide a challenging landscape for scholars to navigate. The meta-objective of this chapter is to bring forth the complexity of the various transmissions through a comparative study of Kūṇḍalini yoga, specifically by comparing its practice in an esoteric environment with its practice in exoteric settings. Conversations from a temple in Kāmākhyā, India, provide the primary data for esoteric interpretations of Kūṇḍalini yoga, while exoteric explanations of the practice draw from interviews conducted in the United States.

Over a period of four years, the study asked eleven research participants in each of the two contexts to reflect on a range of questions that included: What is Kūṇḍalini? Where does it reside in the body? How do you activate the Kūṇḍalini? How does it feel when it rises? What practices or rituals do you follow as part of your Kūṇḍalini yoga practice? (This latter question included specific questions for male and female partners). In Kāmākhyā, all interviews occurred within the guru–disciple rubric. In other words, research participants were all either gurus who teach Kūṇḍalini yoga or their disciples. Research participants in the United States, meanwhile, included authors who publish books on cakra and Kūṇḍalini yoga, gurus, yoga studio owners, 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) instructors and online teachers. The names of all interviewees have been changed in order to protect their identities.

As a result of this comparative study, I conclude that exoteric and normative understandings of Kūṇḍalini yoga are being increasingly popularised both in Kāmākhyā and in the United States. The esoteric – which in Kāmākhyā is believed to be more ‘authentic’ – is tightly confined within the teacher–disciple-initiation (dīkṣā)-secret (gupta) matrix. The chapter’s first section, ‘Context and Terms’, offers a broad overview of the four key terms used here: ‘yogic body’, ‘cakra’, ‘Kūṇḍalini and Kūṇḍalini yoga’. The second section, ‘Behind the veil’, discusses Kūṇḍalini yoga in the context of the Kāmākhyā temple. The third section, ‘Public Kūṇḍalini’, discusses Kūṇḍalini yoga as practised in the United States and contrasts it with understandings of Kūṇḍalini that emerged from the Kāmākhyā temple.
Context and terms

The objective of kūṇḍalinī yoga practice is to raise the kūṇḍalinī in the yogic body, though this objective is often obscured in practice. As Mallinson and Singleton note, ‘The predominance of scientific and medical realism in popular yoga discourse has tended to obscure or displace more traditional visions of the body, and has thereby, mutatis mutandis, reshaped the perceived function of the yoga practices themselves’ (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 171). Studies on the yogic body began before the common era: ‘Some of our earliest Indian sources, dating from the early first millennium BCE, already posit the existence of several bodies, some spiritually constructed, some physically, some psychologically’ (Wujastyk 2009: 190). Texts such as the Tāttiriya Upaniṣad posit five bodies, or ‘ātmans’: ānāmāyā, or the physical body derived from food; prāṇāmāyā, or the body of the vital breath or airs; manomāyā, or the self of the mind; vijnānamāyā, or the self as a locus of knowledge; and ānandamāyā, or the self made of joy (Olivelle 1996: 298–311). In later yogic and tantric traditions from the late first millennium CE, however, a whole ‘alternative’ anatomy evolved. Simply articulated, the body of the yogi now was largely understood as a network of psycho-physical centres (cakras, grānthis, etc.) linked by channels (nāḍīs) that carry air and vital forces (vāyu, kūṇḍalinī, etc.). This understanding of the body has varying levels of empirical existence. For example, in the context of kūṇḍalinī yoga, the cakras, nāḍīs and kūṇḍalinī are visible in the earlier stages of the practice and become progressively corporeal, which enable the practitioner to manipulate them at will. We will return to this progression later in the chapter.

Understandings of the yogic body can vary considerably across different time periods and traditions. Some are comparable and some are vastly different (for example, the body in Āyurveda). Mallinson and Singleton argue that:

this is in part because yogic bodies arise according to the particular ritual, philosophical or doctrinal requirements of the tradition at hand, and because they are expressions of these requirements, rather than descriptions of self-evident, empirical bodies common to all humans.

(2017: 172)

Within the framework of kūṇḍalinī yoga, cakras and nāḍīs are believed to be vital to the practice.

Cakras

The study of cakra and its representations have been brought into popular culture both by academic and non-academic writers. In addition to the scholars mentioned above, Kurt Leland (2016), David Gordon White (2003) and Dorothea Maria Heilijgers-Seelen (1994) are all widely cited scholars of this topic. In popular culture, writers such as Cyndi Dale (e.g. 2018, 2016, 2009), Ambika Wauters (e.g. 2017, 2002, 1997), and Kristine Marie Corr (2016) are just a few of the successful names. Having said that, the study of cakras and the yogic body is still fairly underdeveloped – a scholar and/or practitioner must stitch together a historical narrative from the various sources that are most relevant to their practice and/or lineage.

While the genealogy and history of cakra are obscure to many people (including practitioners), most can articulate an explanation of cakras as a group of energy centres placed along the central
axis of the human body. Historically speaking, there are many systems of *cakras*, and no single description fits them all. ‘Every school, sometimes every teacher within the school, has had their own *cakra* system. These have developed, over time, and an “archaeology” of the various configurations is in order’ (White 2003: 222). White traces the *cakra* system back and forth between texts written sometime between the eighth and the twelfth centuries CE across two religious traditions: Hindu and Buddhist. In the eighth century, two Buddhist texts, the *Caryāgīti* and the *Hevajra Tantra*, ‘locate four *chakras* within the human body at the levels of the navel, heart, throat, and head’ (White 2003: 224).

By the latter half of the first millennium CE, the four *cakras* would develop into the vertical configuration with six (occasionally seven) *cakras* aligned along the spine. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (eighth–tenth CE) mentions six *cakras* along with their respective locations: ‘navel (*nābhī*); heart (*ḥṛṭ*); breast (*ūras*); root of the palate (*svatāllumāḷa*); place between the eyebrows (*bhuvorantaram*); and cranial vault (*mūrdhṇa*)’ (White 2003: 224). The next significant phase in the understanding of the *cakras* came with the understanding of the yogic body in the Nāth Sampradāya. ‘The earliest references to the Nāth ascetic order as an organized entity date to the beginning of the seventeenth century, but its first historical gurus, Mātyendranātha and Goraksanātha, lived much earlier, probably in the ninth and twelfth centuries, respectively’ (Mallinson 2011: 1). The religious views of the Nāth *śiddhas* are obscured by a lack of reliable evidence. However, the *Kaulajīnānāṁpayaya*, which is attributed to Mātyendranātha (Mukhopadhyay: 2012), lists seven linear energy centres along the spine: ‘(1) the secret place (genitals), (2) navel, (3) heart, (4) throat, (5) mouth, (6) forehead, and (7) crown of the head’ (White 2003: 225).

The modern-day transmissions on *cakra* have also borrowed extensively from ‘*Ṣaṭcakrāṇīrūpaṇa*’, the sixth chapter of *Śrītattvavacītamāṇi*. The *Ṣaṭchakranirūpaṇa* is a large work written by the Bengali tantra practitioner Purnanjana sometime in the sixteenth century. The Sanskrit text was first published in 1858 together with a translation into Bengali (Blumhardt 1886: 85). A second Bengali translation and commentary were published in 1860, with a second edition printed in 1869 (Bāier 2016: 313). This text rose to international fame in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In his comments on the *Ṣaṭcakrāṇīrūpaṇa*, Sir John Woodroffe (writing under the name Arthur Avalon; see Chapter 10 in this volume) notes that there are six centres in the body: the spinal centre of the regions below the genitals (*mūrdhṇa*), the spinal centre of the region above the genitals (*svādhiṣṭhāna*), the spinal centre of the region of the navel (*maṇipūra*), the spinal centre of the region of the heart (*māṇḍapa*), the spinal centre of the region of the throat (*vīṣuddhā*) and the centre of the region between the eyebrows (*ājñā*) (Avalon 1978: 141). This linear understanding of the *cakras* system led to several pictorial representations. Applying this model to human anatomy, Woodroffe connects the six chakras to nerve plexuses, thereby bringing the yogic body into conversation with the western biomedical body.

This blended yogic–biomedical body soon became an integral element of American metaphysical discourse and, eventually, counter-culture and popular culture. Beginning in 1880, the Theosophical Society played a significant role in the import of the *cakras* to the west and the construction of modern yoga.

Theosophical constructions of yoga were profoundly influential in shaping contemporary ideas, and [Helena Petrovna] Blavatsky’s claim in 1881—‘neither modern Europe nor America had so much as heard’ of yoga, until the ‘Theosophists began to speak and write’, while hyperbolic, is not made without reason.

*(Singleton 2010: 77)*
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Other notable figures from this group include Annie Besant (1874–1933) and Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who added to the popularity of cakras in this time period.

The twentieth century saw a proliferation of scholarship and literature on cakras from figures such as James Morgan Pryse (1859–1942), Alice Bailey (1880–1949) and the Sikh guru Bhagat Singh Thind (1892–1967), along with a burgeoning of small and large institutes such as the Esalen Institute. For example, Kripal (2008: 6) notes that ‘Eranos [conferences by C. J. Jung in Europe] and Esalen are related European and American counter-culture weavings of radical religious experimentation, technical scholarship, and popular culture that provided the intellectual substance for broad cultural transformations.’ Having mapped the global transmissions of cakras, let us now look at the understandings of kundalinī and the transmissions of kundalinī yoga.

Kundalini and Kundalini Yoga

The transmission of Kundalini and kundalini yoga follow a similar trajectory to the cakras. We begin with two texts from the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries that discuss kundalini. The first is Jñāṇesvari, written by the poet-saint Jnandev (1275–1293), who is considered to be one of the founders of the Maharashtrian Vārkāri or the ‘pilgrim’ movement. The second is the story of Cūḍāla and Śikhidhvaja from the Yogavāsīṣtha, a philosophical text attributed to Valmiki (although the real author is unknown; see Chapple 1984: ix–x).

Jñāṇesvari is ‘a commentary on the Bhagavadgītā of about 9000 verses in old Marāṭhi, most probably completed in 1290 AD’ (Kiehnle 2004–2005: 447). Kundalini is discussed in chapter 6 of Jñāṇesvari. Since Jñāṇesvari is a commentary on the Bhagavadgītā, it follows the same format: that is, Lord Kṛṣṇa instructing Arjuna. Jnandev dedicates seventy poetic verses to describing the effects of kundalini rising (6.222–6.292). Jnandev begins his description of kundalini as an infant snake, bathed with saffron, curled up asleep in exactly in three and a half coils, with her head downward. As a result of breath entering the stomach of the practitioner, the kundalini serpent awakens from her sleep. She softly loosens her coils and rises out of her relaxed body, like a seed sprouting. Having sprouted from its seed of long slumber, kundalini is now famished. With her flaming mouth, she starts to devour the yogi’s flesh. She takes a morsel out of each body part that is covered in flesh and draws the essence out from the nails and the feet before becoming one with the skeleton of the practitioner. She then takes a big gulp of the seven constituents of the body, resulting in the production of an intense and dry heat in the yogi’s body. The yogi’s body is now on fire. The practitioner must endure the intense heat and not let it break his yogic one-pointed concentration. If he is successful in maintaining his concentration, the outside of his body will slowly start to cool down and a type of new body (yogic body) gets constructed. At this point, the practitioner is blessed with siddhis: ‘perfections’ or ‘magical powers’ (Kiehnle 2004–2005: 485). Dependent on the yogic breath, she then enters the yogi’s heart. It is at this point that the intellect is transformed into pure consciousness, and at this stage the male yogic body transforms into a feminine principle. While Jnandev does not provide commentary on the feminine body rising in a male body, we can see the appearance of the androgynous man. The tattvas or the ‘elements’ begin to dissolve, and finally air, the subtlest of the elements, leaves the yogic body.

Jnandev stops using the term kundalini after she leaves the heart, and he chooses to call her mānī, ‘belonging to the wind’. Mānī remains śakti (Śākta and śakti are both derived from the Sanskrit verbal root śak, ‘to be able’) which suggests ability, capacity and energy. The word śakti means energy or power, but when written as Śākti, it signifies the ‘embodied form of Śakti as a goddess’ (Kinsley 1997: 285) until she merges into her final destination, Śiva tattva (thatness, truth, reality). The serpent’s journey from resting in the body of the yogi to becoming one with
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Śiva now comes to an end. By way of conclusion, at the end of chapter 6 Krṣṇa tells Arjuna that yogis who are successful in this sādhana are equal to Krṣṇa himself: ‘Those who did with their bodies just this sādhana which we told, became experts [and] equal to me’ (Kiehnle 2004–2005: 490). In other words, such yogis achieve a divine status.

In the second text, Yogavāsiṣṭha, kuṇḍalinī is mentioned in the story of Čūḍāla and Śikhidhvaja in the pūrṇāḥ section of Book VI called Nirvāṇa-prakaraṇa. This is the only text known to scholars where kuṇḍalinī yoga is shown practised by a woman, Čūḍāla. Čūḍāla is a princess of extraordinary beauty who was married in her youth to a neighbouring prince, Śikhidhvaja. She will eventually become his spiritual teacher. Čūḍāla studied meditation, gaining a deep calm and insight that left her husband bewildered. Śikhidhvaja, on the other hand, ignored Čūḍāla’s advice by renouncing his kingdom and retreating to a distant forest. In his absence, she ruled the country. One day, she took the form of a young ascetic, appearing before her husband as he wandered in the forest and offering herself as his teacher. She instructs him in meditation and mind control, and it is at this point of the story that we find mention of the kuṇḍalinī.

Like kuṇḍalinī in Jñānēsvēri, in Yogavāsiṣṭha she is again described as a coiled sleeping serpent. She is present in all living beings as the supreme power (paramā śakti). The text also uses the same analogy of the sprouting germ as the Jñānēsvēri. Further, in the Yogavāsiṣṭha, her vibration is compared to a bee in a lotus. It touches (sparśa) the yogic body ever so softly, vibrating from within, giving rise to looming sensations and desires (Maderey 2017: 248). Once she rises, her journey to the heart and beyond is similar to the spandana (Silburn 1988: 6). For us to understand what vibration really means here, we have to first quickly arrive at an understanding of the Sanskrit word spanda, ‘vibration’. The best place to get a good grasp of divine vibration is to look at the Spandakārikās. The most popular commentary on the Spandakārikās was written by Abhinavagupta’s cousin and pupil, Kṣemarāja. The word spandana comes from √spand, which means to tremble, quiver, vibrate, throb or move. So what is this movement?

Spanda is the spontaneous and recurrent pulsation of the absolute objectively manifest as the rhythm of the arising and subsidence of every detail of the cosmic picture that appears within its infinite expanse. At the same time, Spanda is the inner universal vibration of consciousness as its pure perceptivity (upalabdhyā) which constitutes equally its cognizing subjectivity (jñātva) and agency (kārtṛtva).

(Dyczkowski 1980: 24)

In other words, spanda is a throb, a heaving of spiritual rapture in the essential nature of the divine, which excludes all succession. Simply put, in this schema the entire cosmos emerges from the pure consciousness of Śiva. Thus, the dynamic movement of Śiva is understood to be the causa sine qua non of all movements (Singh 1980: xvi).

To return to our discussion on kuṇḍalinī, for Abhinavagupta, kuṇḍalinī is the rippling manifestation of Śiva’s throb, both in the universe and the individual. Thus, the objective of kuṇḍalinī yoga in Kashmir Śaivism is for the yogi to make an inward turn by which he can be attuned to and finally identify and recapture the primordial pulsation of Śiva. When the yogi successfully identifies the primordial throb within him, he progresses from duality to unity. Having looked at the transmission of the terms, let us now focus on kuṇḍalinī yoga in the Kāmākhyā temple.
Behind the veil

In terms of age, the temple of Kāmākhya surpasses most of the shrines in India, and even more in eastern India. While it is difficult to date its historical origins, numerous sculptures and the oldest stratum suggest the existence of temples in the seventh century, with a larger temple complex dating back to the Pāla dynasty (Bernier 1997: 23).

The goddess Śoḍaśī (also known as Tripurasundarī) is the heart of Kāmākhya. Śoḍaśī is understood to be a ‘beautiful young girl of sixteen with a red complexion. She is sometimes shown astride Śiva in sexual intercourse. […] Sometimes she is said to sit on a lotus that emerges from the navel of Śiva, who is reclining below her. Her four arms hold a noose, goad, bow, and arrows’ (Kinsley 1997: 11). Śoḍaśī is associated with rajas guna: ‘energy qualities’. In Kāmākhya, the central ritual (pūjā) for Śoḍaśī is the kumārī pūjā. The meta-narrative is that after performing the pūjā in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple and completing the circumambulation, parikramā, one must offer kumārī pūjā (ideally a Brahmin girl between five and ten years old) in order for the visit to the temple and the wish to be complete. In further questioning during fieldwork, however, practitioners articulated benefits of kumārī pūjā that corresponded to the text Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa. For example, it is believed that the worship of a two-year-old led to the extinction of misery and poverty, pūjā to a five-year-old provided a cure to diseases, pūjā to a six-year-old destroyed enemies, and so forth (Banerjee Mukherjee 2016: 153).

Another pūjā relevant to our discussions here is ritual for the goddess Rājarājeśvarī. The Śakta tantra initiates and the Śakta tantra practitioner (sādhaka) perform the Rājarājeśvarī pūjā during the festival of Chaītā Navaratri (March–April). While Śoḍaśī in Kāmākhya is kept in the esoteric, Rājarājeśvarī is understood as existing in the realm of Kamakalā-vilāsa, where the meaning of the goddess is explained within the context of sexual fluids: ‘Red being the female sexual fluid; white, semen, [and] the union of the two’ (Kinsley 1997: 121). Offerings of the paicamakāra or the five substances – madya (wine), māɳsa (meat), matsu (fish), mūḍrā (parished grain) and maithuna (sexual intercourse) – are central to the ritual space (Interviews conducted by the author with Sarma in 2013). The practitioners perform this ritual with their wives and often to the Guptasādhana-tantra – a text that
directs the adept to worship his wife, or the wife of another, by washing her feet with water, then worshipping her forehead, face, throat, heart, navel, breasts, and vagina by repeating one hundred mantras of his chosen deity. At the time of ejaculation, the sādhaka is to offer his semen to Śiva and imagine the sakti as his chosen deity.

(Kinsley 1997: 248)

Kūṇḍalinī yoga is taught and learned within the frameworks of the Rājarājeśvarī pūjā. Specific instructions on kūṇḍalinī yoga are still believed to be guru mukhi vidyā – that is, ‘face-to-face wisdom from the spiritual teacher’ that is meant to be kept secret by the initiate. This often raises the question of how the data presented in this chapter was acquired.1

All kūṇḍalinī yoga practitioners have a bija mantra or ‘seed mantra’, which is chanted at the beginning of the practice to awaken the kūṇḍalinī. It takes several years of dedicated studies and acumen in bodily practices before an individual can be initiated in the larger space of kūṇḍalinī yoga. Hence, the population of adepts who practise kūṇḍalinī yoga in Kāmākhya is rather small. They are also hard to locate, since there are no websites, visiting cards or resumes that practitioners or their respective gurus offer to the outside world to list their accomplishments or their practices. A formidable degree of access is required to be accepted into these tight-knit, highly secretive communities.
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Kuṇḍalinī yoga practitioners in Kāmākhya, begin the practice with a variety of cleansing practices (dhanūti) and purification of the nerve system (nāḍīsuddhi). This is followed by invoking the īṣṭa devatā/devī or ‘patron god/goddess’, followed by the guru who taught the practice. Raising the kuṇḍalinī involves the application of bodily locks (bandhas) as well as sexual intercourse, whether real or imagined. In reference to the bandhas, while there are many locks that the adepts perform as a daily ritualistic regimen, there are three locks that are vital to the kuṇḍalinī practice: mūlabandha, uḍḍiyāna-bandha and jālāndhara-bandha. Successful application of these bandhas affects the nervous (snāyutandrā), circulatory (saṅcaranāḍī), respiratory (śāyantandrā) and endocrine systems (antahkṛāṇī sistēma) and – most important of all – the system of internal energy or prāṇa (Interviews conducted by the author with Ashok in 2013 and 2014). Further, the three bandhas, when performed as a triad, create a vacuum inside the physical body, trapping air and bodily fluids. This in turn creates pressure in the cranial vault (lārōṭisānkrānta khillāṇa), which compresses the cakras.

The objective of kuṇḍalinī yoga is to endure the discomfort felt due to this increased pressure and to allow the śakti to keep moving upwards – that is from the mūlabandha to svādhiṣṭhāna to maṇḍipīṇa, and so on. All eleven interviewees reported that for the longest time (the number of years varied), they failed in completing all three bandhas. However, they were eventually successful through diligent and regular practice. In addition to the cakras and the bandhas, ritualised sexual intercourse also came up as an important facet – especially in the initial stages of the practice. The practitioner needs to get some fluids absent in their bodies. For example, female fluids (vaginal) for a male practitioner and vice versa. The successful combination of these fluids leads to an ‘accelerated stir of the kuṇḍalinī in the mūlabandha’ (Interviews conducted by the author with Mai in 2012, Ashok in 2013 and 2014, and Nirupama in 2015). It is imperative to note that several interviewees emphasised the need to differentiate sexual activities undertaken for pleasure or procreation from those performed as ritual sexual acts, which are essential at the early stages of the training, akin to an orientation exercise. The objective is for the practitioner (both men and women) to avoid releasing their bodily fluids immediately after a climax. Instead, the practitioner must mindfully use the mūlabandha to store the sexual fluids within his or her body.

So, what is kuṇḍalinī for practitioners of kuṇḍalinī yoga in Kāmākhya? Kuṇḍalinī is a ‘kind of light’ (jyoti), which gets activated when one seeks to genuinely know the mysteries of the divine (Interview by author with Mai in 2012). Upon further probing, Mai explained the visualisation of the light as akin to a white dot. The white dot is kuṇḍalinī, the cosmic power that has created the entire universe and is planted as a seed in all human beings. It is the agent in the nervous system that remains dormant for most people, yet kuṇḍalinī can be raised with determination and single-pointed concentration. Once it rises, it is systematically absorbed into the body and blends in with the ‘entire nervous system’, which in turn activates each cell in the body. This eventually leads to a formation of a ‘new body’, a yogic body.

A second definition that emerged from interviews with practitioners is that ‘Kuṇḍalinī is the energy of the īṣṭa devī that rises within the body of the practitioner. In other words, it is the true presence of the divine within the human body’ (Interview by author with Nirupama in 2014). The arrival of the divine and the process of taking abode simultaneously converts the practitioner’s body from being profane to being sacred. When kuṇḍalinī rises, cakra to cakra, the practitioner is blessed with certain special abilities, such as the ability to see into a person’s past, to communicate with a departed soul and other abilities similar to those we see with mediums and psychics in the west. It is only from the transformed sacred body that the practitioner can exhibit these siddhis or ‘special powers’.
A third definition that emerged through interviews was that ‘kundalini’ is red and is like a coiled snake residing in the mūlādhāra cakra, which is present in everyone’s body. It is the brahmāṇḍa in us. This energy must be raised from the mūlādhāra cakra to the sahasrāna cakra. The objective of kundalini yoga is to successfully ‘identify the presence of tattvas in one’s body and be able to channel the elements’ (Interviews by author with Ashok in 2013, 2014 and 2015). When kundalini rises through each cakra, the practitioner’s internal energy generated from the elements (tattva) is transmitted back to the cosmos (brahmāṇḍa). As this happens, the gross material in the body is shed, and the physical body is transformed into a pure body. Ashok uses the example of a car:

If you have not started a car for a long time, it gets rusty. After the initial preparations, when you start the engine, some rusted dust particles and dried oil residue will fall off the engine. In the same way, when kundalini rises, the gross elements from the body are flushed out. A strange kind of sakti called ‘creator power’ (sṛṣṭi sakti) starts to appear, and a kind of heat gets generated. When this happens, it is very important to have a guru. It can be a very scary stage since people will not necessarily know how to deal with this intense experience.

(Interview by author with Ashok in 2014)

To summarise the three sample definitions and the remaining eight discussions from the Kāmākhyā temple, kundalini is mostly understood as the divine energy planted and present in men and women alike. Esoteric yogic practices often grouped under the rubric of kundalini yoga, then, are used to raise the divine energy and to activate it. This form of ritualised yoga is followed by a select few under the strict guidance of their gurus. It is almost never offered and practised in a secular space. Furthermore, the practice is closely interconnected to the goddess, the sakti, and understood as a highly evolved tantric practice. And finally, in the Kāmākhyān worldview, kundalini allows for siddhis. When an adept can successfully raise their kundalini, they are able to provide insights and solutions for life situations. So, what are the esoteric practices that are understood as kundalini yoga in Kāmākhyā? Although they map well to the definitions provided for kundalini, kundalini yoga practices are also somewhat different.

Mai and Ashok provided the most detailed (though somewhat differing) interviews. The remaining nine interviewees either agreed with Mai or with Ashok. Mai’s understanding of kundalini yoga mapped to her interpretation of three kinds of practitioner: unmarried men, married men and married women. In her view, for any man (whether single or married), ‘a female partner is essential for the practice of kundalini yoga’ (Interviews by author with Mai in 2012 and 2013). Mai strongly advocated kundalini yoga to be practised only by married men: ‘A man cannot proceed on this path unless he is married and has a devoted wife who will practise with him. Therefore, success comes to married men only’ (ibid.). Practicing outside the rubric of marriage is problematic, since a majority of people do not understand the relationship between a practitioner and a ‘spiritual partner’ (Interview by author with Mai in 2013). In reference to women practicing kundalini yoga, Mai said that women do not require the support of anyone because they already have all the energies that are required. They do not need a male partner or a husband for the energy to rise or for the practice to bear fruit. If a woman has self-will, determination and blessings from the goddess, she will succeed.

In the context of the practice itself, Mai’s practice included a variety of dhauti and bandhas as discussed above. However, she emphasised the importance of the heart cakra (anāhata cakra).
According to Mai, kundalini rises in the heart and extends progressively through the rest of the body, altering the yogic body permanently:

After kundalini has risen, it creates a new inner body. The new body is formed, each cell in the body, each nerve gets charged; there is a distinct sensation, almost like a vibration, like goose bumps, but the goose bumps surface internally and not externally. Every cell in the body will have bumps. Not a single cell is left untouched. One will have no desire or energy left to move away from this state. Once individuals – male or female – get kundalini to rise, they are never the same again. Something alters within the individual permanently.

(Interviews by author with Mai in 2012 and 2013)

Mai's description of kundalini, the accompanying description of the physical sensations and the feeling of being altered forever are similar to Gopi Krishna's narration of his experience of kundalini rising (Krishna 1970), which I will return to in the Conclusion. Mai also makes some significant claims about the occurrence of the 'new body'.

Ashok's kundalini yoga practice, meanwhile, rested on the physical body and tattva (element). He used the classic definition for tattva as found in Śākta Tantra. There are five tattvas that create global energy cycles of tattvic tides: spirit tattva (ākāśa), air tattva (vāyu), fire tattva (tejas), water tattva (āpas) and earth tattva (prthivi). Most people live their entire life without coming to any realisation of how the tattvas affect the constitution of the human body and nature, whereas for a kundalini yoga practitioner, the identification and wilful activation of the tattvas is significant (Interviews by author with Ashok in 2013, 2014 and 2015). With dedicated practice, the kundalini yoga practitioner gets better at identifying and taking command of the tattvas. This results in experiencing the presence of kundalini. In order to do so, a man or woman must have a guru, a deep desire to activate the kundalini, a commitment to the yoga practice and a partner. This is a significant difference in understanding between Mai and Ashok.

For Ashok, the process involves three steps: identifying the guru, initiation (dīkṣā) and identifying a partner. For kundalini to rise, ‘one must experience ultimate pleasure, climax, and, for that, one needs three people: the guru, the disciple, and the partner’ (Interview by author with Ashok in 2015). The role of the partner is largely to physically draw the ‘bodily fluids from the other sex into one’s physical body’. He further stated that ‘a male practitioner takes help from his female partner (wife) until the time he is able to identify and channel the feminine energy latently present in him. Once the practitioner masters the art of channelling the feminine, he is barred from using a woman as part of kundalini yoga’ (Interview by author with Ashok in 2015).

Since Ashok repeatedly switched between the terms ‘partner’ and ‘wife’, I probed more deeply on the distinction between the two. Ashok clarified that:

Most men practitioners are married, and the wife almost always takes dīkṣā with the husband and performs her duties every day as prescribed. However, there are unmarried practitioners who need the presence of women consorts. In some tantric traditions, unmarried women are frowned upon. But in Kāmākhya, unmarried women who aid adepts in their sādhana are not looked down upon. They are fewer in numbers and are well accepted. It is much easier if the practitioner is married, as no one asks questions. Similarly, a woman practitioner may be allowed a male consort.

(Interview by author with Ashok in 2015)
The above claim is by no means simple or well known in the exoteric space in Kāmākhyā. Further research is required to understand the role of male and female consorts. We now turn to the third section, ‘Public kūṇḍalinī’.

**Public kūṇḍalinī**

In the United States, a large number of people are willing to speak about kūṇḍalinī yoga in the broader yoga community, and the number of definitions for kūṇḍalinī is equally large. The following are some definitions that capture the essence of all eleven definitions selected for this chapter: (1) ‘Kūṇḍalinī is a life energy, which is typically considered feminine. When activated in the body, it stirs the aakaras, which cleanses the body, thereby leading to enlightenment. This helps the person to express her true self on an everyday basis’ (Interview by author with Sandra, 2014). (2) ‘Kūṇḍalinī is the creative power of the individual. An active kūṇḍalinī helps with what you do in life and your energy balance’ (Interview by author with Kaur, 2014). (3) ‘Kūṇḍalinī is a metaphor. It is a metaphor for the life essence of nature and the individual’ (Interview by author with Janet, 2015). (4) ‘Kūṇḍalinī is the presence of Śiva and Śakti. Kūṇḍalinī is our individual power. It is not awake because of ahāṃkāra, or ‘ego’. Ahāṃkāra makes us experience life in ‘separation’, but once kūṇḍalinī rises, we experience ‘oneness’. The binary existence comes to an end’ (Interview by author with Swami Ji, 2016). (5) ‘Kūṇḍalinī is the past. It is the vibration from inside that enables us to fulfill our life purpose’ (Interview by author with Frieda, 2016).

There is a common pattern in these definitions. Most all interviewees in the United States defined kūṇḍalinī in the context of the American metaphysical religion and human potential movements rather than the goddess narrative (except for Swami Ji, an Indian American who maps his lineage to Kashmir Śaivism). For the majority, the practice of kūṇḍalinī is a secular type of yoga that exists outside the tight clutches of a guru, initiation rites and the temple. A majority of research participants in the United States also spoke to the ‘spontaneous arising of the kūṇḍalinī’, which did not come up even once in the Kāmākhyā interviews.

The objectives of kūṇḍalinī yoga practice that emerged in interviews with US-based research participants included making money, heightened sexual experience, completing writing projects, evocative art, success in sports such as baseball and football, etc. It is important to note that in each interview, research participants repeatedly emphasized sexual fulfilment and/or heightened sexual experience as a benefit of the practice. For example, Paulo said:

>kūṇḍalinī yoga is a great practice for men. Kūṇḍalinī yoga generates a strong sense of bliss, which arises from the cessation of the mundane. There is an [outpouring] of happiness, joy, a kind of ‘high’, which when performed with a woman helps break the ego. To be able to share the bliss stimulated in the genitals with a woman partner is a useful vehicle to realize the non-boundary between you and the other, thereby destroying the ego.

*(Interview by author with Paulo, 2016)*

Janet and Sandra spoke at length about how kūṇḍalinī yoga practice brought them closer to their own sexual desires and needs, ‘sort of like being raw and feeling emotions and expressing pleasure without inhibitions’ (Interviews by the author with Sandra, 2014). Further, only two out of the eleven US interviewees shared that they were initiated by a guru whose lineage was mapped to India. These two individuals had an īṣṭa ḍevī, a bija mantra as discussed by the practitioners in Kāmākhyā. The rest stated that they were introduced to the kūṇḍalinī practice in their yoga studio, by a friend, the internet, a book, social media and streaming services.
In the United States, the 3HO movement encapsulates the understandings of the most popular form of \textit{kuṇḍalinī} yoga practice in the United States. Practitioners used a wide range of mantras, including ‘sa-re-sa’, ‘sat-na-a-ma’ and ‘om, om nama śiva’. While three interviewees had not heard of the 3HO, a large majority was at least aware of it or had accessed or attended 3HO workshops. 3HO was founded in 1969 by a Punjabi Sikh, Harbhajan Singh Puri, later known as Yogi Bhajan. He began teaching Kundalini Yoga classes in Los Angeles to largely white, middle-class audience of Americans. There are currently hundreds of 3HO yoga studios across the United States coast to coast (see their website: 3ho.org). \textit{Cakras} remain central to \textit{kuṇḍalinī} yoga practice in the United States, but there are substantive differences between this setting and Kāmākhyā in terms of how \textit{cakras} are understood to be activated. While the large majority activated the \textit{cakra} from \textit{mūlādhāra} going all the way to \textit{svādhīsāṭhāna} (crown of the head), for some, the practice began from \textit{svādhīsāṭhāna} and settled into the \textit{mūlādhāra}. By contrast, beginning from the crown never came up in Kāmākhyā. Finally, there was a wide disparity between the rigour in training. In Kāmākhyā, training is rooted in the Rājarājēśvarī \textit{pūjā} ritual, which is governed by the guru, \textit{guru mukhi vidyā, īṣṭa devī, bīja mantra, bandhas, tattva}, and so forth (as discussed above). The socio-religious power structures continue to shield \textit{kuṇḍalinī} practice from the public eye. The centuries-old patriarchal culture of Hindu India is a meta-narrative, and this narrative yields a meta-power structure, which in turn confines the practice of \textit{kuṇḍalinī} yoga to a select few and keeps the practice shrouded in secrecy. In the United States, on the other hand, terms such as ego, individual, clairaudience, subtle body, creativity, life purpose and sexual fulfilment drive popular narratives. This allows for the practice to be accessible to anyone who may be interested, which in turn allows for more flexibility in terms of who (men and women, initiated or not), where (studio, online, private), and how (crown \textit{cakra} to root, or root to crown) the practice will be taught. A \textit{kuṇḍalinī} yoga teacher may stick to a tradition, as seen by 3HO teachers, or have the complete freedom to create their own practice, which invariably is borrowed from various traditions and styles.

\textbf{Concluding remarks}

Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) gave a series of four lectures in the autumn of 1933 in response to a talk presented by the Indologist Jakob Wilhelm Hauer titled ‘Der Yoga, im besonders die Bedeutung des Chakras’: that is, ‘Yoga, in particular the Importance of the \textit{Cakras}’. Hauer was a missionary to India and later became a professor of religious studies at Tübingen, Germany. He founded a new religion called the Deutsche Glaubensbewegung (Hauer, Heim and Adam 1937). Jung’s use of terms such as ‘suprapersonal’, ‘Soter’ and ‘the Saviour Serpent of the Gnostics’, interspersed with Sanskrit words such as ‘\textit{mūlādhāra}’ and ‘\textit{sūkṣma}’, perfectly exemplifies the cultural fusions and translations that would come to define ‘the serpent’ – that is, \textit{kuṇḍalinī} in the twentieth century. \textit{Kuṇḍalinī} managed to capture the minds of many twentieth-century thinkers and philosophers around the world, and serpent-inspired interactions between these western intellectuals and their Indian counterparts yielded a vast and rich collection of materials. We must deal with and try to better understand these cross-cultural fusions and hybridities and do so without immediately rendering them as ‘appropriations’. After all, the same processes can be seen throughout India and throughout the history of Indian religions.

In a short span of time, the consensus view of \textit{kuṇḍalinī} in the counter-culture and contemporary yoga scene became ‘evolutionary’. In addition to Jung and Blavatsky, Gopi Krishna also a made notable contribution to this understanding. Krishna’s construction of \textit{kuṇḍalinī} and
his interpretive model is drawn from Aurobindo Ghose and Woodroffe (Krishna 1970). Ghose himself drew on earlier sources (Aurobindo 2003) and evolutionary biology in the same way that Woodroffe drew on theosophy and western physiology (Avalon 1978). In short, all were doing something similar, and the meaning of kuṇḍalinī shifted over the course of the twentieth century through each writer.

To paraphrase Kripal’s definition, such a hermeneutic can be understood as a disciplined practice of reading, writing and interpreting through which intellectuals come to experience the religious dimensions of the texts they study. What they study in the texts somehow crystallises or linguistically embodies the forms of consciousness of their original authors. In many ways, this is a kind of virtual initiatory transmission (Kripal 2001). Jung, Blavatsky, Aurobindo, Woodroffe, Krishna and other authors went through a similar process of mystical hermeneutics. All of them started on a personal quest, and somewhere along the way the authors they read, the gurus they spoke with and the bodily disciplines they practised resulted in a fusion of life and text. Evidence of the results of this amalgamation can be found in the vast volumes of written literature they produced in their lifetimes. This literature is rich in preserving some of the primary texts. It also provides a modern-day commentary that helps the reader comprehend a complex practice. In addition, the personal narratives that weave these authors’ works together make them approachable and understandable to a contemporary audience.

Mapping the various transmissions shows that emic descriptions of kuṇḍalinī and kuṇḍalinī yoga essentially have three distinct features. First, kuṇḍalinī yoga practitioners assume the presence of a yogic body. For many of these practitioners, there do not appear to be any necessary ontological dilemmas surrounding the existence of cakras, for example. In many of these esoteric anatomies, the physical or material human body as seen by the naked eye is merely a shell, and it is the yogic body that really drives spiritual enlightenment. Second, kuṇḍalinī is understood to be both a feminine energy and a type of spiritual energy. Third, it is believed that kuṇḍalinī resides coiled in the human body and ordinarily in a state of deep slumber.

In Kāmākhya, kuṇḍalinī is not connected to any organ or to a specific neurological centre in the human body. While most gurus state that kuṇḍalinī resides in the lower recesses of the human body, there are a few practitioners who believe that kuṇḍalinī resides in the heart. In the United States, by contrast, kuṇḍalinī is connected to the mūlādhāra. Irrespective of the placement of this feminine energy within the human body, kuṇḍalinī is believed to be the ‘seed’ of the divine, present in all humanity. The latter universalism is seldom, if ever, articulated as such, but it is almost always implied.

Interviews with kuṇḍalinī yoga practitioners make it clear that kuṇḍalinī is both a physical experience and a psychological or spiritual event. It is at once psycho–spiritual and psychosomatic. Kuṇḍalinī can awaken either through intentional practice or spontaneously. Ritually speaking, it is understood that one experiences awakening of kuṇḍalinī when there is controlled and channelled movement of bodily fluids and breath. The bandhas or ‘locks’ are an essential aspect of this practice. For kuṇḍalinī to awaken and possibly rise, one must successfully and swiftly apply the bandhas. There is a complex esoteric anatomy at work in the modern practices. Basically, there are three bandhas that are vital to kuṇḍalinī, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

Regarding someone experiencing kuṇḍalinī spontaneously or outside an intentional practice, it can be said that the individual unknowingly but successfully applied the bandhas. Irrespective of the geography, a raised kuṇḍalinī is an achievement that few have been able to accomplish. An awakened kuṇḍalinī, on the other hand, is considered relatively simpler to attain, and many in the kuṇḍalinī yoga community are reported to have stirred the ‘Serpent’.
Note

1 I am from Assam. I was first initiated in Kāmākhyā at the age of fifteen. I am a scholar-practitioner and I define myself as an insider with an outsider’s lens.

Bibliography


The yogic body in global transmission