



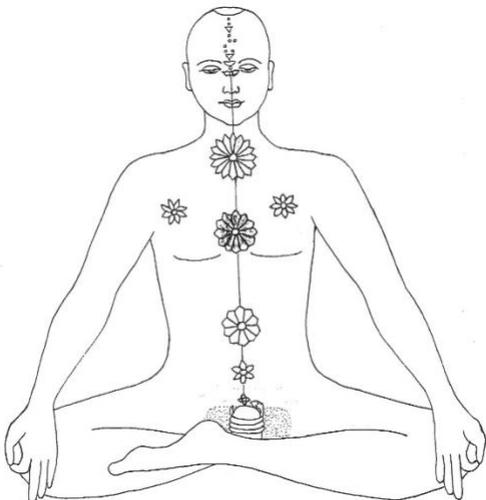
Spontaneous Risings Part Two: Jaime talks with Joan S. Harrigan about Kundalini Risings

Continuing the interview, Jaime asks Joan to share more of her knowledge about Kundalini risings and how they relate to somatic practices focused on self-discovery.

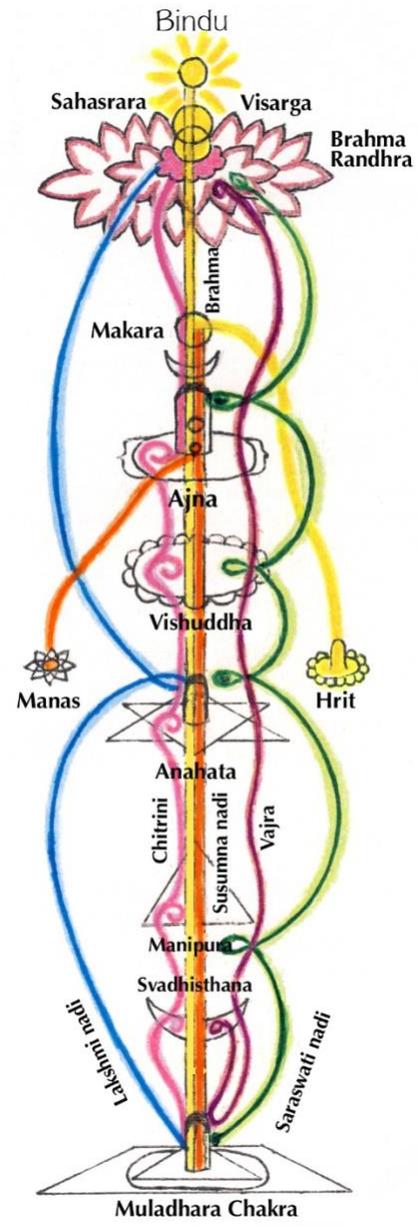
Jaime: What is a Kundalini rising and what are some experiences a person who is experiencing Kundalini activity might have?

Shivarpita: A Kundalini rising is the initial experience of an individual's Kundalini Shakti, or Holy Spirit. Up to that point, it had been residing within the subtle body at the first chakra. The subtle body, as you remember from the [first interview](#), is the energy-mind construct with the physical body. There are specific conditions under which the Divine within can be released from that little home in which she resides after seeing to the manifestation of the gross physical body—the actual construction from the subtle body template.

She takes up residence within her little abode in the root chakra until the conditions are right for her release. That has to do with specific activities of the mind, which must be really focused, and of the energy system, which must be vitalized, and not have a lot of blocks in it. When the energy system starts stirring and heating and activating in a specific way, it is a prelude to the Kundalini release. Finally, things are all aligned in an appropriate way, and Shakti can leave the first chakra. She will enter one of the six Shakti *nadis*—that decision being made according to the condition of the individual's



subtle body at the time of release—and go into that *nadi* as far as she is able to do. In some *nadis*, she will come back down and reside again at the root chakra. But once released, She's not confined there. She can take excursions up at any time after that. Or, if She enters the particular *nadi* I mentioned, called Sushumna, the central channel, and gets as high as the throat chakra, She takes up residence there at the throat chakra, or at the lower brow chakra. These are stable risings. Most of the stories we hear in the readily available literature about Kundalini are rather dramatic. They tend to describe extreme cases of unstable risings in two *nadis* other than Sushumna.



Routes for Kundalini risings

These three *nadis* are usually the routes Kundalini Shakti takes upon release. There are various experiences a person with an arisen Kundalini may have. You'll note I use the term, "arisen" rather than "awakened" because even when Kundalini Shakti is contained in Her home in the root chakra, She is awake and very busily seeing to the well being of the individual, and to the functioning of the gross physical body, the energy system, and the mind. So She's not napping. She is busy keeping things going for ordinary life in the waking state. And She does Her own work in the dreaming state (not in the Archetypal Jungian sense of the all-pervading "dreamtime") while the person is sleeping and dreaming.

Some experiences a person with a Kundalini rising might have are a sense of, "I don't fit in. I'm different. This isn't enough. I'm dissatisfied, or a deep, deep yearning, usually for they're not sure what. It may specifically be for personal development and stability and awareness, or for spiritual advancement. They may have sensations of inner light, sound, currents, or heat, which may feel physical, but are not actually happening in the gross physical body. They're happening in the subtle body.

They may have heightened inner awareness, or heightened outer awareness. Their senses may function more acutely. They may have feelings of energy vibrating or flowing within. They might have some special abilities, or capacities, or talents. Sometimes people say, "but I'm not a good artist," or "I'm not brilliant." Yeah, but you're an organizational genius—that's a special ability.

Some people may experience non-ordinary phenomena, altered states, may be clairvoyant, have healing powers. They might have *kriyas*—spontaneous movements. Suddenly, psychological issues may come forward; they'll have an opening of the psyche that's very dramatic. They become aware of their unconscious all at once, and emotions may fluctuate accordingly. They may have atypical sensations. They may be acutely sensitive, so it may be difficult for them to get through the day comfortably as an ordinary person would. Everything has to be just so, because their senses experience things more sensitively.

They might have an interest in metaphysics, or esoteric things, or religious things, or in spiritual life. They might have an increase in their desire to help other people, to serve, or to be compassionate. They may be more empathic than others. They may have an actual awareness that something non-ordinary, transformative, or holy is happening within them. On the other hand, they may fear something strange and dangerous is happening inside. And they don't know what it is, and don't know what to do about it. So they get an overlay of fear and anxiety on top of their experience, because they don't know how to explain it, and they don't know how to help it improve and feel better.

Jaime: Or know who to go to, to find out about it . . .

Shivarpita: Exactly. And they may feel themselves really developing personally, getting extra insights, and an awareness of some kind of inner guidance they begin to trust that says, "Try this out. Go there."

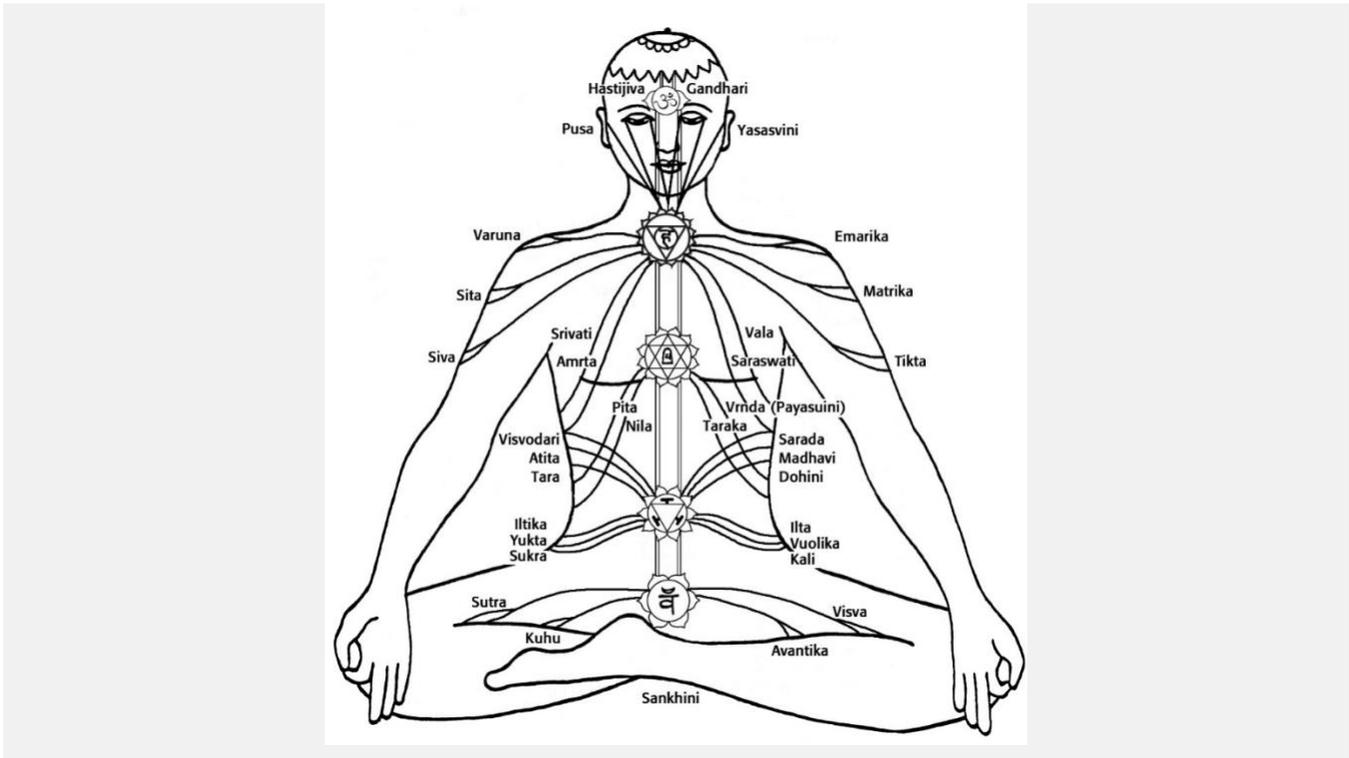
"Why should I go there?"

"Just go there and see what happens." They do. And synchronistically, there is some good thing there that gives them one more clue, or one more helpful method. They find one thing after another until their experience is significantly improved.

Jaime: Vedic and Tantric texts illustrate maps of psycho-spiritual vortices called *chakras*, and potentialities of energy conduction, called *nadis*, having locations associated with areas of the physical body. Is the process of enlightenment, human awakening, or whatever it might be called, an embodied one?

Shivarpita: Because the human being, as described in the *kosha* model of Vedanta (see [Part One](#)), exists on a continuum from subtle to gross levels, it is clear that the subtle system co-exists with the physical. You cannot, through gross anatomy, find a chakra or a *nadi*. You will find a plexus and a nerve, but not a chakra and a *nadi*, because the chakra and the *nadi* are correlated, although not always specifically and directly, with the gross physical body. They're not in the physical body, they're in the subtle body. They're in "dreamtime". They are energetic, they are mental-emotional, and they affect the gross physical body. If you have third chakra

issues—mentally, emotionally, energetically—and they go on and on, it is not unlikely to find that they manifest as a physical ailment in the digestive system, for example.



Root chakra, not shown, is located behind ankles in this image

The depiction of the chakras looks like a hierarchical, development system. A lot of modern books describe human development as going along these hierarchical developmental steps beginning with the root chakra, at the base of the spine, which is earth element. Then, the second chakra is at the level of the genitals and the bladder, which includes the kidneys, which is water element. Then up to the third chakra, at the solar plexus, which is fire element; it's the furnace. The fourth chakra at the level of the lungs is the nurturing system, and air element. Then, the fifth chakra is at the level of the throat, where swallowing and vocalizing happen, receptivity and creativity, and space element. Then finally, the sixth chakra, that's described in the yogic texts is at the brow, which is beyond the five elements. It is the seat of mind.

All this is sometimes presented as if you had to figure out all your first chakra, security issues before you could graduate onto your second chakra, dyadic relationship, reproductive, and sensual issues. Then you graduate onto your personal power issues, the top dog-underdog struggle, and “how do I behave in groups,” issues. Then it's onto the heart level, where you

figure out how to be a good parent, a good friend, a good citizen, act with ethics and empathy, and do your part for the betterment of humanity and yourself, without burning yourself out. Then you can graduate onto creativity and trust issues, and then on to discernment.

Having to progress only in this step-wise manner, to me, is very limiting. I have not seen it manifest in exactly that way. Life is a lot messier than that. Some people with really groovin' heart chakras, are really confused on the first and second chakra levels, and so on . . .

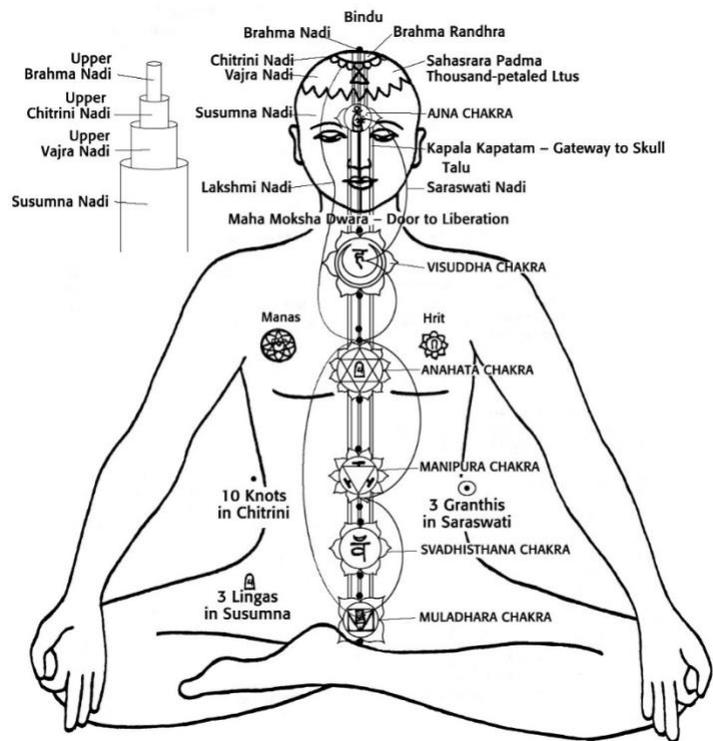
But, as far as a psychological system for identifying issues, I find this western understanding of the chakra system convenient, because it's one more way of categorizing what's going on with a person, much like the Myers-Briggs Jungian types, the Enneagram fixations, voice dialogue of sub-personalities, and even Games People Play. There's lots of wonderful ways to understand the psyche, to know where our issues or blocks are, and where we need to focus our inner work. But as far as a system for how human beings develop, the process is not that tidy in my opinion. It doesn't seem to be the way it works spiritually, either.

I think the western misunderstanding of the chakra system, as being a strictly hierarchically developmental paradigm, is from a reading of the classic text, *Sat Chakra Nirupana*, the most available translation of which is called, *The Serpent Power*, by Sir John Woodroffe. In this text, the author, who was a Kundalini expert, describes chakra by chakra, all the possible experiences one might have from each chakra, one after the other. He does this as a literary convention for organizing material. My understanding is that the author did not mean to say that when a chakra opens, say the first chakra opens—that's the first step—then you have every experience of the first chakra; you know it all. Then you go on and do the same thing at the second chakra. That's not how it happens in real life.

Even the phrase "an open chakra" can be confusing philosophically. Does that mean there's a lot of energy flowing in that chakra? That's not always good news. Does it mean that the energy function is balanced in that chakra so the organism (which is made to function by cooperation of mind and body, vitalized by energy) can function as it should, so one maintains health? I think what modern chakra writers really mean when they say a chakra is open, tends to mean you have all these fabulous capacities that are described, including *siddhis*, or special powers.

It's a little complicated to describe in brief, but in the yogic, or eastern description of the six chakras, which is what *Sat Chakra Nirupana* means, there are various *nadis*, routes, channels, or subtle body tubes through which energy flows—that the Holy Spirit can enter. The ancient texts only describe six main chakras. When the Holy Spirit, i.e. Kundalini Shakti, enters one of these tubes, specific experiences, distinct to that particular *nadi*, can occur. In one of the *nadis*, called Sushumna, at the upper brow, is the experience called Makara, which is the experience of entering into a state beyond “dreamtime.” Truly of the spiritual or celestial realm, the experience there is one beyond mind. It's very peaceful and quiet. It's not a hallelujah chorus-fireworks experience; it is a transition into a profound peacefulness and objectivity.

From there, one of the ways the Divine within may progress is to clear out the thousand-petaled lotus, as our brain is called. In English, this would mean we improve how our brain functions. It's not called the seventh chakra in the classic texts, but is Sahasrara, the thousand-petaled lotus. It becomes the job of Kundalini Shakti—the Divine within, the Holy Spirit alive within us—to use the energy system capacities to clear out the contents, the old, old stored impressions in the mind that block our growth and disturb us.



One of the ways this whole clearing process might work is that Shakti would choose to go in a chakra-by-chakra way. But that doesn't happen until Shakti is at the upper brow. That's an advanced, stable stage. It's a base camp from where She does the clearing work. So we're not talking to rank beginners when we say the human developmental process happens on a hierarchy from the first chakra up to the sixth chakra.

Jaime: In the West, Kundalini experiences have been confused with mental illness, called dangerous, and deemed “spiritual emergencies”. For most of my life my impression was that it was something to stay away from. How is what you offer different from the confusion proliferating in the west about the presence of Kundalini Shakti in one’s life?



Shivarpita: This is an important point from my perspective, because to me, Kundalini Shakti is my Mother Divine. This is a profoundly sacred, loving and beloved presence within. It is the Holy Spirit, the indweller, the comforter, the wise council, the spiritual guide that knows us inside and out. I love this presence deeply. I hear people—and I understand why they do it, it’s a misunderstanding—sometimes speak so badly about that awful Kundalini who they say, “attacked me suddenly one night, and now my life is ruined. I just want to get rid of it.” This level of misunderstanding is rampant in the colloquial literature. It’s a misinterpretation, or mistranslation, of the original sacred spiritual scriptures on the topic that were first translated, perhaps by secular academicians, or by Christian missionaries who perhaps wanted,

what they called Hinduism, to look ridiculous in order to get more converts.

I apologize for that, perhaps, bias. But I think in fact, it happened because of some Christian zealotry. And that’s understandable also. When you feel like you’ve got the right, good thing, you want everyone to enjoy it. But with our limited awareness, we tend to distort other people’s systems, and put forward ours in an all-to-often chauvinistic way, which is regrettable as far as inter-spiritual understanding of how the Divine transforms the human being—which is why we’re here.

We're here to be transformed. It's to be the best possible human being we can be, and that means we enter into the spiritual realm. It's not about what religion are you, or what belief system. Because no matter what spiritual frame you are inclined toward, or resonate with, or what spiritual, or religious tradition you love, or were brought up with, or practice, human beings become spiritual in somewhat predictable ways.

If you cross-compare the world's great spiritual traditions, there are gleaming similarities among them. There is a value system, an ethical code, an idea that certain things are virtuous and helpful while other things get in the way, distract, disturb, and are not helpful to spiritual life. There are lifestyle considerations. There are actual physical postures.



Chapel of Grace, photo J.S.Schmitt

When I was young, I was taught to kneel on the floor. Place palms together at the heart, bow the head, and repeat a short prayer over and over again, which makes breathing come into a regular rhythm. That's yoga. It was never called yoga when I was a child, and some people in the Christian church would object to having "kneel in prayer" called a yoga pose. But it is! All the great spiritual traditions have poses they like because of the effect these poses have on the subtle body system.

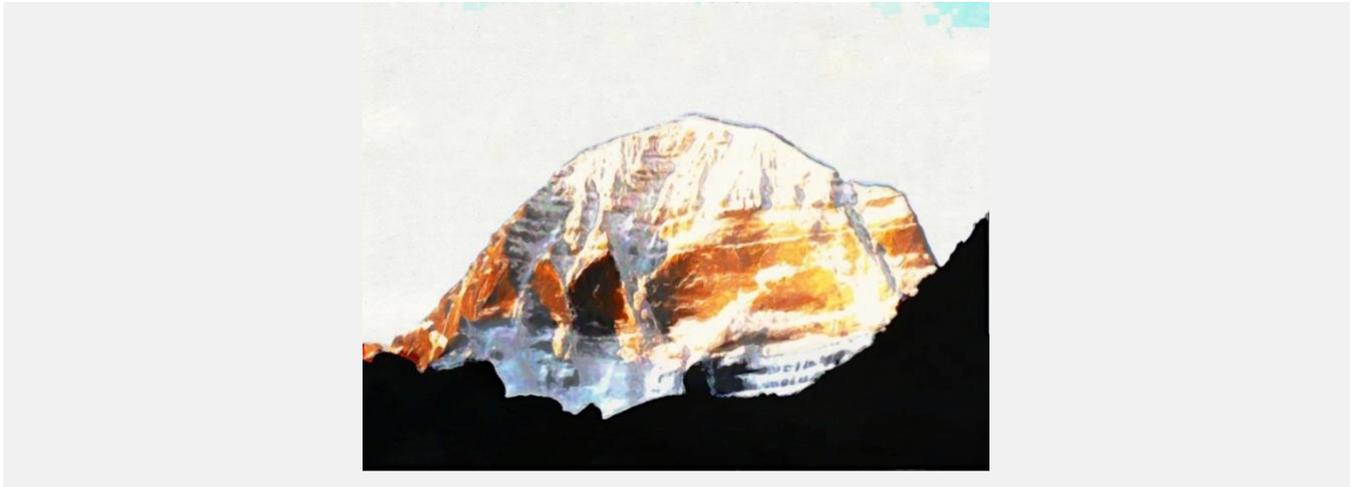
Jaime: When I first heard stories about Kundalini risings and how dangerous they were, I remember thinking, "there's something in this about the misogyny of our western culture." I thought this because Kundalini Shakti was depicted as a wild feminine force, the yin side gone

wild, and this was called an “emergency”, a “spiritual emergency.” That something spiritual could be so profoundly physical seemed to cross western theology’s lines of what is supposed, or allowed, to be “spiritual.” Certainly not the body. It was like spirituality couldn’t be embodied, and definitely not feminine, which has been called, by some religious, “the abomination.”

Shivarpita: That’s an excellent point, and I’m afraid, filled with the truth. The feminine principle represents the mysterious, the unknown, the unconscious, the uncontrollable. You can’t make it behave in a structured, rational, linear, overt way. She is, “She who must be obeyed.” Shakti is the Great Feminine. Kundalini Shakti is the Goddess, the Holy Spirit within us. In western circles, Kundalini, which is always spelled with a lower case “k”, is accused of being the source of wild *kriyas*, unleashed emotional traumas, strange discomforts that no physician knows what to do with. That little, tiny part of the spectrum of possible experience has become the definition of what Kundalini is.

But in traditional times, Kundalini Shakti, was honored as the Divine, the Divine Indweller, the Divine in us Saint John talks about in his gospel, as do the other gospel authors. So anything strange and uncontrollable seems to be, now by definition, some Kundalini thing, and it must be controlled. That is not the way we look at it. We honor this presence. The reason it sometimes manifests in a very difficult and uncomfortable way is because the individual doesn’t understand what to do to make things better. It’s because of an ignorance of what spiritual life requires that the experiencers suffer. People actually might say, “Listen. I don’t want to get spiritual, I just want to get comfortable.” That’s not going to hack it.

If you don’t have a spiritual intention, an uncomfortable Kundalini process is not likely to get more comfortable. One has to become a Kundalini whisperer, like how a horse whisperer knows everything about what a horse is communicating, what it needs, and how to cooperate with it.



Mount Kailash by Genevieve Schmitt

Likewise, a spiritually aware person who really wants their spiritual life to improve, will listen to the whisperings of Kundalini Shakti. Sometimes she becomes so frustrated because we don't listen to her whisperings, She becomes very loud and starts to shout. The Puranic literature tells mythological stories about how spiritual life unfolds. Here, She is frantic to get out of wherever She is stuck to be able to go to the top of this sacred mountain to be one with her beloved. So she might get angry and even shake us, because She is desperate to become one with her beloved, Shiva, who resides at the pinnacle, or bindu, above the chakras—Mount Kailash.

So if she needs to shout at us, if She needs to shake us to get our attention so we will listen to what She needs, instead of just doing everything we want, She'll do that. That's a "spiritual emergency". I might call it a spiritual wake-up call. What your doin' isn't workin'. You got to change. But mostly people don't want to change unless they're forced to change. The formula seems to be, "When the pain of changing becomes less than the pain of staying the same, we will change. But sometimes only then." Sometimes we have to be pushed and dragged toward our spiritual transformation.

Now a lot of people are not just willfully going against the Divine imperative. They honestly don't understand, and don't know what to do to improve their spiritual process. And some people have tried many, many, many things, both sincerely and very ardently, and they may still have a few discomforts. But the main discomfort is their yearning for spiritual

advancement, or their dissatisfaction with their level of spiritual development. They become frustrated and start to feel hopeless in their disappointment. We really love to help people in that situation. We're not designed for people in an acute emergency who need strong intervention right now because of the dramatic depth of their suffering.

Sadly, there's a lot of misunderstanding out there. I've seen websites and books that will scare your socks off. I believe they are founded on distorted descriptions of some original information. The only solution to a spiritual dilemma is a spiritual solution. So the first order of business is to find some way to get a spiritual perspective on the whole seeking, or whole discomfort dilemma.



As far as the misunderstanding around lower-case kundalini and upper-case Kundalini Shakti—that is kundalini as a wild, aberrant, esoteric energy that might attack you at any moment, and you must protect yourself against at all costs, compared to Kundalini Shakti, the beautiful, benevolent, living Goddess of spiritual transformation within every human soul—the difficulty with defining kundalini lower case “k” as an aberrant, esoteric, wild energy is that it give some thing other than self to blame. The human psyche tends to limit our awareness of self, our contribution to any of our dilemmas, and what we can do in our own inner transformation to get through our misunderstandings and blocks, to advance through our own awareness, understanding, and effort. So if the problem is external, it means the solution has to be external.

I really believe most of our difficulties generate from our own psychological blocks and constructs. If we find a safe way to open up around those, we realize they're not necessary. They get themselves out of our way, and through our own effort we can really advance. We are then empowered by knowing there's something we can do. And we don't have to rely on

chance, fate, some expert doing something to us, or on receiving some benevolent gift that some advanced being would bestow upon us.

Kundalini Vidya is a system that makes profound sense. It has its own logic. It is an inner spiritual science. It's not that I, as the retreat director, or Swamiji as a spiritually advanced sage, does anything to the practitioner. We just happen to know, through Kundalini Vidya (Traditional Kundalini Science), how to understand what kind of process a person is in spiritually, and what practices would be a good match for them. We use gentle poses, breathing patterns, contemplation, meditation, spiritual lifestyle, good nutrition, good rest, and good life situation, as much as you can make it so. And this tends to lead to a more stable, gentle experience of improvement of the process that's already there. We don't use any occult or dramatic interventions. We use only gentle, safe, spiritual methods. Really, dramatic interventions tend to yield dramatic experiences that might turn into a spiritual emergency. We put a package together. We create a retreat environment where they can do practice in a safe, gentle way, based on time-tested, spiritual-based oral lineage-conveyed, traditional information and practices.

A lot of people who are seeking help with what may be called a "spiritual emergency" already have Kundalini process. So avoiding anything that has to do with Kundalini is not going to solve the dilemma. They already have Kundalini process; they just don't know it. They haven't identified it yet. I would advise anyone who is having great big Kundalini experiences to not seek help in a way that involves great big dramatic interventions. That's just a rule of thumb. We also don't use any kind of psychedelic or entheogenic substances. We consider those esoteric, and a bit of a wild card.

Likewise, the first step to any Twelve Step Program is to admit that the little me, "I" personality can't figure this out, and doesn't know what to do. But somewhere, somehow there is a power, an awareness, an understanding greater than myself that is benevolent, and can guide and help me to a better way of being in my life. That's the first step, I believe, of any spiritual self-improvement program.

You're not giving up critical thinking. You're not giving up saying, "let me investigate this. Let me query people about this. Let me read about it". You certainly want to do that. You certainly want to contemplate it in your heart, soul and mind, and let your own inner wisdom tell you whether you resonate with it or not, whether it seems worthy of more exploration or not, or whether it's just not your ballywick. And if not, then you go search elsewhere.

Jaime: Somatic inquiry is exploration of, and understanding derived from embodied experience, usually for the purpose of personal development. Would you consider Kundalini Vidya a form of somatic inquiry?

Shivarpita: In my understanding, somatic inquiry is an awareness of your presence in the moment, as you experience it on whatever levels come to you, the body being the most prominent, and then whatever, from a deeper level, also informs, enlivenizes that embodied feeling of self.

In Kundalini Vidya, the awareness is truly towards the whole person on all levels. The Vedic philosophy and Yoga philosophy from which Kundalini Vidya emerged, sees the human being on a continuum, with the body being the most readily available. Then it goes to a level of breath and energy, then to a level of the thinking mind, then more of a discerning knowing level of mind, and then to a "beyond mind" experience—which is hard to describe—and then finally to the ultimate essence. So to me then, somatic inquiry would be, in a way, a statement from the Old Testament, "I am here, lord. I am here." And our distinct awareness of our existence in this instant is an awareness of self-on-all-levels, or on as many as we can consciously experience in that moment.

The gross physical body has many intricacies and refined functions that are not readily in our conscious awareness at first request. The physical actually goes to a very subtle level. And then we may ponder advanced physics—that light is both particle and wave—particle being physical, wave being energetic. Likewise the human being is physical at first glance, and energetic at a more subtle level.

This brings to my mind the meaning of the sound the breath makes as it is termed in Sanskrit. When we inhale, we make the sound, “ssssss” when we exhale “hhmmm”. It sounds like “so” as you inhale, “hum” as you exhale. And of course the mantra, “sohamsohamsoham, hamsa, hamsa, hamsa,” is also a part of that depending on where you start. “Hamsa” in Sanskrit actually means light; I am light. Our breath is reminding us, with every inspiration and exhalation, that there is more to us even than the vitality that respiration brings to the organism. We are light. Many spiritual traditions would say, we are all animated sparks of divine light. So I believe Kundalini Vidya certainly honors somatic inquiry, and is a major way of becoming aware of a profound process, or potential, in us.

In the Yoga tradition, of course, *asanas* are one important practice for becoming more deeply in-tuned with ourselves physically, also with the autonomic nervous system, and specifically the parasympathetic nervous system. The deep level functioning of the autonomic nervous system is much like that twilight or gray realm where particle becomes wave and where physical becomes energetic. Yoga also has breathing practices that help us become more aware of that subtler energetic aspect of ourselves. Breath awareness is certainly a part of somatic awareness. When we are aware of our breathing, we often become more aware of what’s going on in mind. The Buddha had two great spiritual practices: (1) be aware of the breathing, and (2) be aware of, or watch the mind.



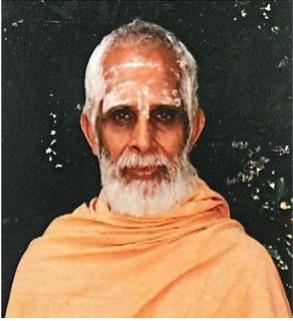
Grace Cathedral, photo by J.S. Schmitt

I remember from my own childhood, being raised in a religious tradition, that we were encouraged to have long periods of stillness. You can imagine for a little child, especially one as antsy as I was, to have the expectation to “be still, and focus the mind in prayer with an uplifting emotion of devotion.” What comes forward is that the breathing is then kept to calming down the body and the mind so you can focus in prayerful awareness. We know from modern research that breath patterns are directly correlated to emotions. There’s a specific breathing pattern for anger, for depression, for anxiety, and for peaceful awareness. So to my way of experiencing, it’s not just, “be aware of the body, be aware of the breath, be aware of the mind”. Each level of awareness opens the way for a deeper awareness to come forward.

We don’t know where all this will lead when we begin just being aware of the body. In my psychological training back in the 70s, cognitive behaviorism was the reigning paradigm. But there was also a very big movement for humanistic psychology. Some of the gestalt awareness exercises asked, “Where do you feel that emotion?” One would turn inward and say, “It’s in my gut.” “Where in your gut? What is the quality of that experience?” Words would come forth to describe it more specifically, and then the feeling would come more into awareness. It’s all arising on a continuum from body to wherever that ultimate subtle-most awareness is.



Bri. Joan Shivarpita Harrigan, Ph.D. has practiced, studied, and taught Raja yoga and Advaita Vedanta for almost thirty years and has been tutored in Traditional Kundalini Science since being initiated as a brahmacharini (monastic) in the Shankaracharya tradition in 1987. She is the designated successor in the lineage of Traditional Kundalini Science specialists represented by Swami Chandrasekharanand Saraswati, and is the author of *Kundalini Vidya, The Science of Spiritual Transformation*. Her doctoral dissertation investigated the effects of Hatha Yoga asanas and diaphragmatic breath awareness on stress.



Ordained a monk in the Adi Shankaracharya order in India in 1956, **Swami Chandrasekharanand Saraswati** has over fifty years' experience researching the teachings and methods for guiding Kundalini process. He supplemented his special instruction in oral tradition commentaries with intensive scripture study and by gathering spiritual methods throughout India. Versed in Raja yoga, Advaita Vedanta, Ayurveda, and Sanskrit and Tamil texts, Swamiji is the living representative authorized by a lineage of Kundalini specialists with an intact oral tradition over five hundred years old and an ageless inner tradition. A repository of spiritual knowledge both ancient and modern, his outlook is universal and practical. Swamiji resides in Rishikesh, India.



Patanjali Kundalini Yoga Care is a spiritual direction service that offers individual guidance for qualified spiritual seekers of all spiritual traditions to help them effectively support their Kundalini process. Bri. Shivarпита Chaitanya (Joan S. Harrigan, Ph.D.) is the director of PKYC-USA, and Swami Chandrasekharanand Saraswati of Rishikesh, India, is her spiritual guide and director of PKYC-India. Spiritual science is a sacred, complex, and not generally understood topic that has been systematically studied, refined, and preserved in the mystical teachings of the sacred traditions of the world. Because Kundalini Shakti, the Divine within, by whatever name, is the essential common factor operant in all spiritual experiences, the study of Kundalini is the study of spirituality itself.

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