A Definition of Kundalini
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Kundalini - Sanskrit, literally "coiled". In Indian yoga, a "corporeal energy" - an unconscious, instinctive or libidinal force or Shakti, envisioned either as a goddess or else as a sleeping serpent coiled at the base of the spine, hence a number of English renderings of the term such as 'serpent power'. Kundalini is considered a part of the subtle body along with chakras (energy centres) and nadis (channels). The overall conception has many points in common with Chinese theories of acupuncture.

Yoga and Tantra propose that this energy may be "awoken" by such means as austerities, breath and other physical exercises, visualisation and chanting. It may then rise up a subtle channel at the spine (called Shushumna) to the head, bringing psychological illumination. Each chakra is said to contain special characteristics. Yogis tend to attempt this alone, Tantrics in couples, both usually under the instruction of a guru. When Kundalini Shakti is conceived as a goddess then, when it rises to the head it unites itself with the Supreme Being (Lord Shiva). The aspirant gets engrossed in deep meditation and infinite bliss.

+++ Indian sources

A number of models of this esoteric subtle anatomy occur in the class of texts known as Âgamas or Tantras, a large body of scriptures, rejected by many orthodox brahmins. In early texts there are various systems of chakras and nadis, with varying connections between them. Over time a system of six or seven chakras up the spine was adopted by most schools. This particular system, which may have originated in about the 11th century AD, rapidly became widely popular. This is the conventional arrangement cited by Monier-Williams, where the chakras are defined as "6 in number, one above the other".

The most famous of the Yoga Upanishads, the Yogatattva, mentions four kinds of yoga, one of which, laya-yoga, involves Kundalini. Another source text for the concept is the Hatha Yoga Pradipika written by Swami Svatmarama (English translation, 1992) somewhere between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.

+++ Western interpretation

Sir John Woodroffe (pen name Arthur Avalon) was one of the first to bring the notion of Kundalini to the West. A High Court Judge in Calcutta, he became interested in Shaktism and Hindu Tantra. His translation of and commentary on two key texts was published as The Serpent Power. Woodroffe rendered Kundalini as "Serpent Power".

Western awareness of the idea of Kundalini was strengthened by the Theosophical Society and the interest of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875-1961). "Jung's seminar on Kundalini yoga,
presented to the Psychological Club in Zurich in 1932, has been widely regarded as a milestone in the psychological understanding of Eastern thought. Kundalini yoga presented Jung with a model for the development of higher consciousness, and he interpreted its symbols in terms of the process of individuation”.

In the early '30s two Italian scholars, Tommaso Palamidessi and Julius Evola, published several books with the intent of re-interpreting alchemy with reference to yoga. Those works had an impact on modern interpretations of Alchemy as a mystical science. In those works, Kundalini is called an Igneous Power or Serpentine Fire. Another popularizer of the concept of Kundalini among Western readers was Gopi Krishna. His autobiography is entitled Kundalini—The Evolutionary Energy in Man.

According to June McDaniel, his writings have influenced Western interest in kundalini yoga. Swami Sivananda produced an English language manual of Kundalini Yoga methods. Other well-known spiritual teachers who have made use of the idea of kundalini include Osho, George Gurdjieff, Paramahansa Yogananda, Rudi (Swami Rudrananda), Yogi Bhajan and Nirmala Srivastava.

Kundalini references may commonly be found at present in a wide variety of derivative "New Age" presentations. Stuart Sovatsky warns that the popularization of the term within new religious movements has not always contributed to a mature understanding of the concept.

Recently, there has been a growing interest within the medical community to study the physiological effects of meditation, and some of these studies have applied the discipline of Kundalini Yoga to their clinical settings. Their findings are not all positive. Researchers in the fields of Humanistic psychology, Transpersonal psychology, and Near-death studies describe a complex pattern of sensory, motor, mental and affective symptoms associated with the concept of Kundalini, sometimes called the Kundalini Syndrome.

Lukoff, Lu & Turner notes that a number of psychological difficulties might be associated with Asian spiritual practices, and that Asian traditions recognize a number of pitfalls associated with intensive meditation practice. Transpersonal literature also notes that kundalini practice is not without dangers. Anxiety, dissociation, depersonalization, altered perceptions, agitation, and muscular tension have been observed in western meditation practitioners and psychological literature is now addressing the occurrence of meditation-related problems in Western contemplative life.

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