

Kuṇḍalinī

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Synonyms: *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, *kuṇḍalī*, *kuṇḍalikā*, *kulakuṇḍalinī* (etc.), *kuṭilā*

Definition: The “coiled power:” the cosmogonic energy of the divine and, in yoga, the spiritual force dormant in the human person.

Introduction and early history

In Hindu tantric traditions, especially Tantric Śaivism and its offshoots, *kuṇḍalinī* designates the power (*śakti*) of the divine as both primordial, creative energy, and as a spiritual potency latent in the microcosm of the human person. In cosmological terms, *kuṇḍalinī* is the power stimulating creation, conceived of as an emanative, sonic sequence. In individuals this creative power lies dormant, likened to a “coiled” (*kuṇḍalī*, *kuṇḍalinī*), slumbering female serpent. Aroused through yoga, *kuṇḍalinī* rises through the body, engendering mystical experiences, occult power (*siddhi*), and, ultimately, liberation from the cycles of birth and death. In tantric doctrines, these dual movements—the emanative descent of the transcendent *kuṇḍalinī*, and its yogic ascent in the person—mirror each other, representing the processes of creation or emanation (movement from subtle to gross) and reabsorption or liberation (movement from gross to subtle), respectively.

Kuṇḍalinī belongs conceptually to the esoteric physiology of tantric yoga, comprised of vital airs or energies (*prāṇa*), channels known as *nāḍīs* through which these flow, and focal points

along the body's vertical axis known as wheels (chakra) or lotuses. The vital air associated with respiration ordinarily flows through a pair of channels to the left and right of the spine—*iḍā* and *piṅgalā*, respectively, associated with the moon and sun. A yogi, however, seeks to open the subtle medial channel termed *suṣumnā*, associated with fire. When the vital air is drawn into the central channel, the *kuṇḍalinī* rises, hissing and straightening like a cobra struck by a stick (10: 269). Ascending from its resting point at the base of the torso to the head, it releases the 'nectar of immortality' (*amṛta*), engendering experience of a supernal bliss. Aspects of this nexus of ideas may have ancient roots: the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (6.16), for instance, speaks of the heart possessing one hundred and one *nāḍīs*, of which one extends to the crown of the head; "Going up by it, he reaches the immortal" (14: 246). Ascension through the medial channel is a widely shared premise of yoga traditions, which nonetheless diversely conceive of what ascends: the soul or self (designated *jīva*, "life-essence," or *haṁsa*, "the gander"), vital air (*prāṇa*), seed or seminal essence (*bindu*), mantric resonance, *kuṇḍalinī*, or, in Buddhist tantric systems of yoga, the fiery energy known as *caṇḍālī* ("the consort").

Absent from the 'classical yoga' of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*, *kuṇḍalinī* first comes into evidence in *circa* 6–8th century C.E. scriptures of Tantric Śaivism, known as *tantras* or *āgamas*. While significant to multiple tantric traditions, including the Śaivasiddhānta and Pāñcarātra (16), *kuṇḍalinī* attains particular prominence in the goddess-oriented (i.e. *śākta*) Kaula traditions and the second-millennium texts of Haṭha Yoga. A potentially very early reference occurs in *Sārdhatriśatikālottara Tantra* 12.1–2, which speaks of a "primordial coil" (*ādyā kuṇḍalinī*) in the heart in the shape of a bud, possessed of moon, fire, and sun—possibly an allusion to the three

principle *nāḍīs*—and associated with flowing nectar (2: 106–7; 16: 110). Conceptions of *kuṇḍalinī* as both cosmogonic power and yogic energy come together in *tantras* such as the *circa* 8th-century *Tantrasadbhāva*, one of the earlier sources to characterize the *śakti* as serpent-like (15: 128–30).

Kuṇḍalinī in non-dual Śaivism

Non-dualist Śaiva philosophers such as Abhinavagupta (fl. *circa* 975–1025) conceived of *kuṇḍalinī* in terms of cosmology and theories of language, as well as yoga. They in fact envisioned multiple *kuṇḍalinīs*, as reflected in a threefold scheme distinguishing *śaktikuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇakuṇḍalinī*, and *parākuṇḍalinī*: the cosmogonic creative power, the vital energy of living beings, and the supreme, ineffable power of the divine, respectively. Thus conceived, *kuṇḍalinī* represents “the origin, the substance and the consummation of everything” (18: 24). Cosmologically, *kuṇḍalinī* is the starting point of emanation when this is conceived of in terms of vibration or sound—the very stuff of creation. As the supreme creative energy, *kuṇḍalinī* unites with Śiva in the form of *bindu*, the ‘point’ or ‘drop’ from which the primordial creation issues forth as subtle resonance. The creative activity of *kuṇḍalinī* then gives rise to the Sanskrit alphabet in an emanative sequence, beginning with *a*—thence mantra (the ultimate form of language) and the sequence of *tattvas* (ontic levels or planes of existence) (15). Ordinary speech also reflects the creative activity of *kuṇḍalinī*. At the level of the root chakra (*mūlādhāra*), the Word (*vāc*) exists in transcendent form (*parā vāk*) as undifferentiated phonic energy, containing the essence of language. With *kuṇḍalinī*’s imperceptible ascent to the navel chakra, sonic

vibration reaches the incipient stage of differentiation—language in inchoate, potential form (*paśyantī vāc*). At the level of the heart chakra, this becomes particularized in intermediate form (*madhyamā vāc*) as the unexpressed inner dialogue of thought. Reaching the chakra of the throat, the Word attains expression as verbal utterance (*vaikharī vāc*), completing its movement from unmanifest to manifest (15).

In yoga, however, the ascent of *kuṇḍalinī* effects a movement from manifest to unmanifest, from materiality and diversity to the absolute unity of consciousness. In the microcosm of the person the serpentine vital power lies dormant, situated in the basal or root chakra (*mūlādhāra*) at the root of the torso near the anus—a view common by the ninth or tenth century. Earlier sources diverge, however, owing to evolving conceptions of the chakras and *nāḍīs*: the base of the medial *suṣumnā nāḍī*, locus of *kuṇḍalinī*, was positioned varying in chakras of the heart or navel, or frequently in a ‘bulb’ (*kanda*) somewhere below, this eventually being localized in the root chakra (7; 6). There the *kuṇḍalinī* slumbers, coiled three and a half times around a *bindu* (point) representing Śiva. Blocking entrance to the central channel with her head, she contains a poison that enervates through sexual agitation. When awakened, she liberates. This may transpire through spiritual gnosis or techniques such as breath control (*prāṇāyāma*) and mantra incantation (*japa*). Ascending through chakras of the navel, heart, throat, and head, piercing various knots (*granthi*) and the “gateway to Brahman” at the aperture of the skull, *kuṇḍalinī* attains to the seat of the supreme deity twelve fingers above (18: 27–33).

Kuṇḍalinī in Śākta tantra and Haṭha Yoga

Second-millennium conceptions of *kuṇḍalinī* have been profoundly shaped by a closely-related yoga system first attested in the *circa* 10th-century *Kubjikāmata*, root scripture to the Western Kaula tradition (*paścimāmnāya*). This tradition equates its paramount goddess, the crone Kubjikā (“hunchback”), with *kuṇḍalinī* (5: 88–90). Its system of six *cakras* (*mūlādhāra*, etc.) was disseminated widely, becoming the basis for the influential yoga of Śrīvidyā (the cult of the goddess Tripurasundarī) as well as the *kuṇḍalinī*-yoga of trans-sectarian Haṭha Yoga (17: 687–88). A particular Śrīvidyā text teaching this system has influenced the modern image of *kuṇḍalinī* above all others: the *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* (*Description of the Six Centres*), chapter six of the *Tattvacintāmaṇi* of Pūrṇānanda (16th century). This was first published in 1918 with a translation and extensive introduction in *The Serpent Power* by “Arthur Avalon”—pen name of the British Indian judge, Sir John Woodroffe, and his Bengali collaborator, Atal Bihari Ghosh (20). Modern conceptions of *kuṇḍalinī*, and indeed Hindu tantric yoga generally, owe an extraordinary debt to *The Serpent Power*. As Kathleen Taylor (20: 134) remarks, “It has probably helped to standardize the number and positions of the *cakras* in modern works on yoga, for it was for long the major work on the subject in English. It has been quoted in nearly all subsequent secondary sources for decades, even by Indian yoga teachers and gurus themselves writing in English, who used it instead of going to the original texts.”

Composed in elegant Sanskrit verse, *Description of the Six Centres* (22: 317–479) describes an ascending series of chakras or lotuses, delineating the *nāḍīs* that connect them, their petals, geometric patterns, and colors, mantras, presiding divinities, and the occult powers (*siddhi*) attained through their mastery. Prominent here is *kuṇḍalinī*’s identity as the supreme deity

Herself, the Mahādevī or Great Goddess, a *śākta* emphasis also conspicuous in the yoga of the influential 12th-century *Śāradātilaka Tantra* (4). According to *Description of the Six Centres*, *Kuṇḍalinī* reposes in the basal lotus (*ādhāra-* or *mūlādhārapadma*) of four petals situated between the anus and genitals at the root of the *suṣumnā nāḍī*. Downward facing, its four red petals have inscribed the Sanskrit syllables *VA-ŚA-ŚA-SA* in gold, and enclose a golden square in which the syllable of the earth element (*LAM*) is written in white. Presiding over the chakra are Brahmā, with an elephant as his vehicle, and the goddess Ḍākinī. In the center is a downward triangle with the icon (*liṅga*) of Śiva known as Svayambhu in the middle. Radiant like lightening, the serpentine Kulakuṇḍalī coils around him three and a half times like the spiral of a conch, her gaping mouth covering the entrance to the *suṣumnā nāḍī* and the even subtler channels therein. With the *mūlādhāra* begin a series of lotuses or wheels: the *svādhiṣṭhāna* at the base of the penis (male anatomy is presupposed), *maṇipūra* at the navel, *anāhata* at the heart, *viśuddha* in the throat, and *ājñā* between the eyebrows, with a seventh lotus of a thousand petals (*sahasrāra*) above, the pinnacle of the yogic body and abode of the supreme deity, Śiva. One established in the disciplines of yoga may awaken the serpentine *śakti*, “attacking with the vital air and fire” the *liṅga* around which she slumbers and causing her to enter the medial channel (v. 51). Ascending through the six chakras, piercing *liṅgas* in the heart (*anāhata*) and forehead (*ājñā*) and drawing the life-essence (*jīva*) upwards with her, she unites with Śiva in the lotus of one thousand petals (*sahasrāra*), engendering the highest ecstasy. As *kuṇḍalinī* returns to the basal lotus she releases a flood of divine nectar. Perfected in this process, the yogi may attain liberation.

While basically sharing this system of chakras, the post-12th century texts of Haṭha Yoga present a distinctive vision of *kuṇḍalinī-yoga*. These texts codify practices deeply indebted to the Kaula *tantras*, but divorced from their sectarian moorings, doctrinal systems, and elaborate ritual (11). Distinguishing Haṭha Yoga is its emphasis on corporeal disciplines, including cleansing practices (*dhauti*), postures (*āsana*), seals (*mudrā*), and locks (*bandha*), in addition to meditation (*dhyāna*) and breath control (*prāṇāyāma*). Due to the influence of the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, all of these came to be viewed in terms of arousing the *kuṇḍalinī* (11: 774–75), primarily through the manipulation of *prāṇa*. As the original *Gorakṣaśataka* describes, the downward-moving vital air, called *apāna*, must be forced upwards by “locking the root” (*mūlabandha*), a practice involving pressing the anus with the heel. Then, “when the *apāna* has become upward moving and goes together with the fire to the place of *prāṇa*, then—with fire, *prāṇa* and *apāna* having quickly come together—the coiled, sleeping Kuṇḍalinī, heated by that fire and stimulated by the breath, makes her body enter the mouth of the Suṣumnā. Then, having pierced the knot of Brahmā, which is born of the *rajas guṇa*, she quickly flashes like a streak of lightening in the mouth of the Suṣumnā” (10: 270–71). Such “forceful” (*haṭha*) techniques for raising the vital energy are prefigured in texts of Vajrayāna Buddhist yoga (3: 534–38; 21: 220–22).

Kuṇḍalinī in modern times

In Yoga’s encounter with modernity, *kuṇḍalinī* has followed multiple trajectories. Haṭha Yoga and its traditional practitioners, including Nātha yogis, fell into disrepute in colonial India along with all things tantric, while in early twentieth-century India religious revivalists and

nationalists reinvented Yoga in novel ways (19). Though these reformulations usually marginalized tantric yoga, international attention and a new respectability attached to it with the publications of Woodroffe. This is exemplified by the psychologist Carl Jung's fascination with *kuṇḍalinī*. Much like his appropriation of tantric mandalas, Jung's *kuṇḍalinī* only vaguely resembles the *śakti* of the *tantras*; he identifies it with the "anima" of his psychoanalytical theory, the 'suprapersonal' principle or divine urge (8: 21–22) which activates the unconscious. For the actual techniques of yoga, Jung had little use; he viewed tantric yoga as symbolizing the psychological journey of individuation. Western interest has by no means remained confined to the symbolic, however. Especially from the 1960s, diverse Indian gurus teaching tantric or haṭha-yoga inspired *kuṇḍalinī*-yoga have attracted international followings, including Harbhajan Singh Yogi, Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, Osho/Rajneesh, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, Swami Muktananda, and Swami Shivananda. The serpent power has also taken on colourful new guises in New Age spirituality (12: 265–94).

The roots of *kuṇḍalinī* in tantric esotericism, sexual symbolism, and metaphysics, on the other hand, sit uncomfortably with the secularized and medicalized fitness regimen yoga has increasingly become (1). This tension, as well as its creative possibilities, is exemplified by Gopi Krishna (1903–1984), a Kashmiri civil servant who wrote autobiographical accounts of harrowing mystical experiences he attributed to *kuṇḍalinī*. Krishna (9: 176) came to understand *kuṇḍalinī* as a biological mechanism that is "the real cause of all genuine spiritual and psychic phenomena, the biological basis of evolution and development of personality, the secret origin of all esoteric and occult doctrines, the master key to the unsolved mystery of creation, the

inexhaustible source of philosophy, art and science, and the fountainhead of all religious faiths, past, present and future.” Released from its traditional habitat, the “spinal serpent” (13) thus rises into a liminal space straddling science, philosophy, and embodied experience.

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