THE KUNDALINI CRISIS

A Study of the Apparent Psychopathological Effects of Meditation

by Tom Thompson

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Introduction: Meditation in the U.S.A.

As western industry and technology reached its zenith, many Americans discovered that material wealth and pleasures alone do not give meaning or purpose to their lives. Living under the pressures of an intense, fast-paced society, they found themselves "leading lives of quiet desperation."(1) For many, their traditional religious and philosophical systems began to seem hollow, dogmatic, and generally non-applicable to their present life situation. Many of these people began searching for some way to find meaning in their lives and often this searching led to the (re)discovery of ancient yogic pathways from the East, especially the way of meditation.

Meditation was first introduced to America on a public basis by Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Vivekananda was a powerful yogi and a charismatic teacher and soon became the subject of newspaper articles from Boston to San Francisco. Even today, most major U.S. cities have meditation centers that were started by either Vivekananda or one of his many disciples. The next wave of meditators began in 1920, when Paramahansa Yogananda intrduced the meditation technique of Kriya Yoga to the United States. Again, there was a very positive reaction to meditation. Yogananda, in the thirty-two years he spent in the West, personally initiated over 100,000 people in the technique of Kriya Yoga. Today, Yogananda has many living direct disciples who are still teaching and practicing Kriya Yoga.

In 1959, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi intoduced TM (Transcendental Meditation) to Americans. Using the latest Madison Avenue techniques, Manesh Yogi mass marketed TM to such an extent that it became known as the MacDonalds of meditation. None-the-less, scientific research showed that the regular practice of TM (and other meditation techniques) helped eliminate stress from the system, reduce blood pressure, and enable people to find the peace and calm they so badly needed.

Finally, in 1970, Swami Muktananda, an acknowledged Siddha(perfected) saint in India, came to the U.S. teaching Siddha Meditation. Just by meditating in his presence, many people began to directly experience their own natural perfection and thus finally found answers to who they are and what they are doing in this world. Muktananda continues to teach meditation in the west and this summer will reside at his ashram (spiritual retreat) in South Fallsburg, N.Y.

Although meditation has been practiced in the west now for many years, it is important to remember that meditation comes from ancient traditions

that view reality in ways radically different from those in the West. In these traditions, life is much more expansive and all encompassing, taking into account many factors that are not readily acknowledged in the West. For instance, personal reality does not take place only in one life,but in many lives.(re-incarnation).Also, all of one's thoughts, attitudes, and actions directly influence one'sexperience,i.e. the individual creates and is totally responsible for his/her own reality(karma).Thus, if things are going wrong in your life, you have no one to blame but yourself.What you experience in external reality is just a mirror of your inner state.And the turmoil of the inner state is created by one's desires, graspings,compulsions to have the world a certain way to fit one's needs. In the ancient traditions, meditation is a way of letting go, of perceiving the world as it is, not as a projection of our ego needs. And ,accoruing to these traditions,the way the world really is,is radically different from the way we think it is. It seems we are functioning in one of many planes of reality and basically this plane,created by our desires and projections,is not real (maya) in the ultimate sense of the word. Meditation traditionally is a way of transcending this world and coming in contact with Ultimate Reality (Brahman).

No matter how "Westernized" a meditation technique may be said to be, a Westerner who meditates will sooner or later have experiences that are in direct conflict with what he always "thought" real. Ram Dass, formerly Dr. Richard Alpert of harvard University, says:

> "Over the years we develop strong habits of perceiving the universe,and we come to be very secure within these habits. We selectively perceive our environment in ways that reinforce them.This collection of habits is what we call ego.But meditation breaks the ego down.As we begin to see through it we can become confused as to what reality is.What once seemed absolute now begins to seem relative.When this happens, some people get confused;others fear they may be going insane."(2)

Most meditators are able to integrate their experiences and allow their knowledge of reality to gradually grow and change over a period of time. None-the-less,more and more people who meditate are finding their entire world shaken and they feel lost between realities. Many of these people became involved meditation in hopes of finding a way to tune down and relax.They were not made aware of the powerful effects meditation might have. These people often end up in crisis and may seek

pschiatric help.Unfortunately, for the most part,the psychiatric profession has not been able to help such people because they are usually misunderstood, misdiagnosed, and then mistreated. The end result is often a very confused,very frightened individual who now is labelled mentally ill. Dr.Stanislov Grof, a psychiatrist,says;

> "There has been increasing evidence that many episodes of unusual states of consciousness that have been labeled and treated in the context of conventional psychiatry as manifestations of mental disease(psychosis) can be better understood as "spiritual emergencies" or "transpersonal crises".The application of the traditional medical and psychiatric models to these states is not only inappropriate, but also in many cases clearly detrimental...it seems that the number of people involved in spiritual emergencies is rapidly increasing...many of those who have consulted psychiatrists or psychologists have been misunderstood, misdiagnosed,and mishandled.A process that can be extremely beneficial and transformative when completed and well integrated has been in many instances arrested in various difficult stages by tranquilizers...we have found that most people undergoing a transpersonal crisis innately know they are involved in something other than psychosis, but cultural conditioning causes a great deal of fear and hesitancy since many of the experiences take them beyond what is considered "normal" in the West." (3)

The purpose of this paper is to explore what is happening to people in spiritual or transpersonal crisis from meditating,and suggest ways that modern psychiatry can understand and help these people.complete their process of inner growth without medicating them, hospitalizing them or driving them crazy.We'll start by looking at Kundalini, the key to meditation and the altered states of consciousness meditation brings about.

Kundalini: The secret of meditation,enlightenment...and psychosis?

Ramakrishna, a 19th century saint and avatar considered to be the incarnation of both Krishna and Rama,said;

> "A man's spiritual consciousness is not awakened unless his kundalini is aroused."(4)

Gopi Krishna, a current mystic and scientist,said that:

> "This mechanism,known as kundalini,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 religous faiths,past,present and future."(5)

Without having some understanding of Kundalini, it is impossible to understand the process of meditation.as it might be said that the purpose of meditation is to awaken the kundalini. Alright then,what is kundalini?

According to the ancient traditions of yoga, when God (Shiva) is at rest,all is void,nothing at all exists except pure undifferentiated Consciousness.This consciousness contains all potential (Shakti) and when this potential manifests,this world(along with countless others) comes into existance.In other words,Shakti,as the creative aspect of Shiva,creates the world.But Shakti is also intelligent and she wants to play in her creation so she creates individual units of consciousness at various stages of awareness and calls them living beings. It is very important to understand that the creation and creator are one and the same.The universe is the play of consciousness.And we are individual units of consciousness,but consciousness is consciousness no matter how it defines itself.An analogy would be ice floating in the ocean. Although it "appears" different from the ocean as it has shape and form, in essence it is the same as they are both water.

After Shakti has manifested the entire universe,she goes to rest in individual beings in the form of kundalini.As long as she rests,we see the world as real and seperate from God. When she is again awakened through meditation,we experience her entire dance or play within ourselves and eventually have the direct experience that we are,in fact,Shiva, or Pure Consciousness.Simply put, involution is the manifestation of the forms of the universe (ice). Evolution begins with the awakening of kundalini which leads us to discover that although we see ourselves as

ice(individual beings),our true nature is water(God or Shiva Consciousness).

Kundalini rests in man at the base of his spine.It usually manifests as sexual energy so the dance will continue and more little units of consciousness will be created. As long as man's attention is directed outward,he will just keep reproducing and the dance of life and death will go on and on.But when the individual begins to question his being and purpose and turns inward,he will feel a stirring deep within and gradually the Kundalini will awaken and the journey back to the source will begin.

This evolution of consciousness takes place in seven psychic centers known as chakras and are located within the human body (but are not physical centers). The first is at the base of the spine and is called the muladhara. Consciousness at this level is interested only in personal survival. The svadhisthana is located in the sexual area and deals with reproduction. The manipura is in the navel plexus and deals with power and control. The anahata is near the cardiac plexus and this is where true love and compassion first arise.It is the first truly spiritual center.Next is vishuddha near the thyroids that gives rise to intuition and psychic powers. The ajna or third eye is the center for Cosmic Consciousness and finally there is the Sahasrara at the top of the head where one loses individual consciousness and merges with Shiva. Yogis sometimes do psychological profiles using the chakra system.For instance, if one's consciousness is mainly in the first three charas,all one is interested in is personal comfort,sexual activity and money.Needless to say,many people are very stuck in these chakras.Hollywood caters to them. The world can be a very threatening place to such people.When one enters the higher chakras,one begins to see we are all actually one and that to help others is to help oneself.People in the higher chakras generally go into service-oriented work such as medicine,social work, teaching or religion. As each chakra is purified through meditation, consciousness rises to a higher center.

The process of kundalini may seem strange to the Western mind, yet it seems to parallel very closely to Freud's concept of libido. Calvin Hall,in his book, A Primer of Freudian Psychology,says:

> " The human organism is a complicated energy system, deriving its energy from the food it eats and expending it for such purposes as circulation,respiration,digestion nervous conduction,muscular activity,perceiving,remembering,

"and thinking.There is no reason to believe that the energy that runs the organism is essentially any different from the energy that runs the universe." (6)

To fully study the relationship between Kundalini and Libido would require an entire book. From the yogic point of view, Freud was a master of the second chakra.He understood it very well. Fortunately,man's evolution does not stop there.

A master of Kundalini yoga,Yogi Desai, also acknowleges the relationship between Libido or sexual energy,and Kundalini.

"The same force, the same energy that is used for the sexual act can be transmitted into energy for higher growth...this energy is one and the same as Kundalini...because sex is the master energy,by harnessing it you automatically bring all other energies under control." (7)

Many Western scientist and psychiatrists have become interested in studying the Kundalini phenomena. Although the internal , subjective states of meditators are difficult to study in an objective fashion,the process of Kundalini often brings about powerful physical and physiological changes that can be measured and studied, These manifestations are known as kriyas or spontaneous movements that bring about purification. They are experienced as sensations of heat, cold, automatic breathing of various kinds, postures, jerking seizure-type movements,laughing,crying, utterances of deformed soumds,feelings of fear,joy,the curling back of the tongue,revolving of the eyeballs,temporary stopping of the breath,itching ,crawling, or burning sensations through-out the body, intense sexual desire,feelings of incredible energy,and trance-like stupors. As you can well imagine, a meditator without knowledge of the Kundalini who begins to manifest these quite normal kriyas might well think himself going insane or possessed by demons.More on this later.

Based on his research of meditators, Itzhak Bentov , a medical engineer, created a fascinating model of what is now known as the physio-kundalini syndrome. This model is in total accord with modern science, yet adequately explains the mystical aspect of Kundalini and consciousness. It is explained in detail in Bentov's book, Stalking the Wild Pendulum-on the mechanics of consciousness. Basically,it verifies the reality of the Kundalini process for Western science, a necessary accomplishment if we are to help meditators in spiritual crisis. To treat something, we must first admit it exists!

Although this paper will deal specifically with the negative psychological reactions relatively normal people may have from meditation, it is important to note that two of the most prominent researchers in the area of bio-energy and Kundalini feel that an abortive or misguided Kundalini reaction may be related to most forms of mental illness, especially those known as manic depressive illness and schizophrenia. In a paper to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in 1975, Gopi Krishna stated:

> "The latest studies show that schizophrenia, manic depressive illness, and other serious forms of insanity have roots deep in the organic soil of the body...on the activation of Kundalini there occurs a high increase in the production of bioenergy and also an enhancement in its potency. The ecstatic vision of the mystic, the creations of genius, the performance of the prodigy, the phenomena of the medium, and the nightmares of the insane are all, without exception, the product of this enhanced flow of a more potent form of bioenergy into the brain...I am positive about the fact that a morbid activation of Kundalini can lead to psychoses in a variety of forms.I myself passed through phases akin to them during the period of my transition from one state of consciousness to the other. It took years for the new state to be stabilized. I have witnessed the same shifts towards a borderline mental condition on the activation of Kundalini in several other cases also. The extreme hazard involved in a <u>forced voluntary arousal</u> of the Kundalini, which has long been known in India, stems from this possibility. The abortive cases turn into schizophrenics and manic depressives, in some cases displaying remarkable psychic gifts. Research on Kundalini can lead to the causes responsible for vitiation of the psychic currents and their cure.Modern psychology clearly accepts the close association of sexuality with mental disorder but the actual mechanism is never signified." (8)

Itzhak Bentov, in a discussion on the psysio-kundalini syndrome,says:

> "The psychological symptoms tend to mimic schizophrenia. It is very likely, therefore, that such individuals may be diagnosed as schizophrenics and be either institutionalized or given very drastic and unwarranted treatment.It is

ironic that persons in whom the evolutionary process of nature have begun to operate more rapidly, and who can be considered as advanced mutants of the human race, are institutionalized as subnormal by their "normal" peers. I dare to guess, on the basis of discussions with my psychiatrist-friends, that this process is not as exotic or rare as one would like to believe, and possibly 25 to 30 percent of all institutionalized schizophrenics belong to this category-a tremendous waste of human potential." (9)

From the above quotes, it is obvious that Kundalini awakening can take place in people other than meditators.The awakening can take place for any number of reason, but these reason are always accompanied by intense emotional or psychological states.Two examples are a person falling intensely in love may momentarily activate the Kundalini and experience a state of total all-encompassing love for everything that exists.For a moment,they are clearly in a transcendental state. If they get "stuck" in this state, they will either be recognized as a saint or as mad.The other example is an artist at work on a masterpiece.The work totally consumes the artist and his one-pointed concentration and devotion will activate the process of Kundalini.He will literally be in another world and may often forget to eat or sleep. Usually,when the work is successfully completed, the artist will return to "normal", but again he may get "stuck" and appear quite mad.

Traditionally, as stated before, yoga and meditation are ways of awakening and controlling the process of Kundalini so that the individual may attain his highest potential. To do this, a specific set and setting are necessary.Diet,sleep,activity,mind and environment are all controlled so that all of the variables are known.Also the awakening and process are guided by a fully realized Guru. In many ways,one is in a process of re-birth and should be taken care of,until the Kundalini process matures, like a young child.Guidance and information are of the utmost importance. Unfortunately, these are still not always available to many meditators in the West. When something seems to go wrong in meditation, they are often on their own (like a child lost in the woods),or they put themselves in the hands of the local psychiatric center. It is important for all psychiatric professionals to be aware of the potential of the Kundalini crisis.

To better understand the process of meditation from a Western point of view, we will look at a statement by Dr. Nuernberger, a Western psychologist and meditator.

"To achieve a state of samadhi (perfect meditation) requires long periods of intense practice geared towards eliminating conditioned patterns of thought, beliefs, behavior, and emotions. In essence, meditation is a deconditioning process which gradually eliminates the reactive or conditioned behavior and patterns of an individual.

Dickman (1969) refers to this process as deautomatization, the shift from an active intellectual, analytic, and abstracting mode of being to a receptive, perceptual mode of being. This requires, and is, a disruption of the hierarchial structures by which we organize our perceptual realities.

In other words, the way we think, feel, and act are habits that we learned from birth on (or even earlier). The way we perceive reality is the way we have been conditioned to perceive it, not necessarily the way it is. Through the practice of meditation we begin to decondition or destroy, those habit structures which dictate to the incoming perceptual data. Thus we begin to perceive our world from new perspectives, and thus begin to behave differently. When we say that meditation is a process of personality transformation, we mean that meditation gradually eliminates the habituated ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.that have dominated and controlled our lives.

Meditation does not focus on changing behavior like the intent of Behavior Modification. Meditation does not focus on changing feelings or beliefs like many psychotherapies. Meditation does not focus on teaching old, new, or in-between ideas like our educational systems. Meditation is the process of experiencing and completely understanding one's true Identity. From this awareness comes a natural and progressive transformation of the personality. With this transformation comes the ultimate and total control over the various levels of consciousness which are the tools of the superconscious state." (23)

And now for some case histories...

The Kundalini Crisis

Lets start by looking at a history that is typical of hundreds of meditators through-out the U.S.

> "I was living alone that year,1972,writing a novel.An article on Women's liberation,published in Esquire,had made me temporarily famous,and I had an advance to live off,which, if I was careful,might last until the book was finished. I had a four-room rent controlled apartment on West 11th street,500 records,and a new boyfriend.There was nothing wrong with my life,except I couldn't seem to stay interested in it." (10)

The author of this paragraph was suffering from what I call the Buddha Syndrome.,She had attained what many people would consider success. She was successful in her work which supported a worthy cause,she was making money at her work,she was famous and well regarded,she had a boyfriend,and she was basically living well-but she was not happy. There had to be more to life than "material success." Like so many others, Sally (now Ma Durgananda) began seeking,and what she found,again like so many others,was meditation. Meditation was very helpful.It calmed her down and gave her a center to live from.It was helping her find meaning in her life.And then one night:

> "...I had sat down one evening on my little black meditation cushion and felt an explosive force rush through my body and gather at the top of my head. It stayed there for hours, light and heat pushing out the top of my skull, alternatively exciting and scaring me, because the experience made me wonder whether I had not reached the point of no return. I knew, of course, that meditation was not something you just did to make yourself feel better, but also something that actually had the power to change you. But I had never felt anything quite so insistant as that gathering energy, and the first thing that occurred to me when I came down was that I really needed some expert help." (11)

Fortunately, the expert help Sally turned to was in the form of

her Guru,Swami Muktananda. None-the-less, she continued to have some experiences not readily understood in the West.

> "The next day I closed my eyes to meditate and felt the circle of Shakti inside my forehead swell up until it became my entire field of consciousness. Everything seemed to disappear into it, the room, my body, everything there was. For a moment I felt consciousness,everything,alone. Then I got scared, here I was inside this lonely unity, without even a mantra to hold on to, and where was my body?.Floating in disembodied intellect, I spent the rest of meditation trying to identify what was happenig to me."(12)

The effects of the Shakti(Kundalini) are not just felt during meditation. It is a constant, on-going process that is intensified during meditation, but continues during the activities of daily living. In the early stages, before there is much control of the process, this can bring trouble.

> " Two days later I found myself on a plane for Chicago, carrying so much Shakti in my heart that I could barely speak. How stoned I was I realized one afternoon when I drove a borrowed car thirty blocks before remembering to release the emergency brake." (13)

The feeling of being "stoned" or "spaced out" in meditators is often called "depersonalization" in psychiatry. The DSM III recognizes meditation as a possible predisposing factor to depersonalization disorder. (14)

Another case history is given by Lee Sannella, a West Coast psychiatrist and meditator who currently directs the Kundalini Clinc in San Francisco. This case history is especially interesting as the individual was eventually able to complete the meditative process and was verified as being fully Enlightened by the great Zen master,Yasutani Roshi.

> " Flora Courtois (1970) is a fifty-nine year old writer, who started her search many years ago when she began to question her teachers, and have doubts no one could help her with. Her first contact with an experience of "the