

Review Article

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The Impact of Kundalini Awakening on Personal Life and Psychotherapeutic Practice

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ABSTRACT

The process of kundalini awakening has all the elements of an extraordinary experience. In this article, the author will show that from his research and experience this process of spiritual awakening can be seen as a benevolent developmental step for individuals.

The process of kundalini awakening has a profound impact on yogis and meditators around the world. Different reports circulate varying from disturbing disintegrating experiences to blissful ones. In this article, Kundalini awakening is described as a natural process of activating dormant energy in the CNS. During Kundalini awakening the neutral observer, the witness, the container is awakened as part of the process. This article describes the spontaneous awakening of the author during an intensive Vipassana retreat. It took years to digest the impact of this experience. And while doing so, a natural integrating in the Psycho-therapeutic practice of the author evolved. The central insight is to cultivate the neutral internal observer. The neutral observer stance creates opportunities for beneficial and enduring change. Clients are trained to become aware of their feelings and (hidden) thoughts without reacting to them. By doing so clients learn how to contain dysfunctional emotions and transform them into functional emotions. For all of this neutral observing is the key ingredient.

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Early in the morning, the fourth day of a silent Vipassana retreat. I am meditating. Just attending the movement of the breath in my body with my awareness. As I have been doing the last three days of this silent retreat. Suddenly my back feels like rubber, flexible. The backache from the last days is gone. My body starts to vibrate, to shake. I just keep on meditating. A flush of energy runs from my legs through my body to my head. My whole body is vibrating. I keep my eyes closed and observe what is happening. No special ideas come to my mind. No special feelings show up. Everything appears neutral and calm. I get a vision of three monks right in front of me. They tell me to keep on meditating, that they will take care of my energy. I see one big monk making stroking gestures around my body, while a young monk teases me and plays with me. The third monk just observes. I feel supported and happy and while noticing this, just keep on meditating.

This happened in the winter of 2003. And now, years later, I realize that I was going through a process of Kundalini awakening.

Kundalini is generally understood as an energy that influences both our bodies and minds. As such, several physical and psychological characteristics may be expected to identify kundalini arousal [1]. Kundalini is described as dormant energy in the Central Nervous System that can be activated or awoken [2]. After awakening, it

circulates through the body. During its rising it causes the CNS to throw off stress. A process of mentally and bodily purification. There is a variety of symptoms of kundalini awakening. Not all of them will happen in individuals undergoing this process of spiritual awakening. Greyson developed the Physio-Kundalini Syndrome Index, a 19-item dichotomous questionnaire to study kundalini and its effects. The Index includes 4 major categories: motor symptoms, somatosensory symptoms, audiovisual symptoms, and mental symptoms [2].

According to Sanella Kundalini awakening is not simply an altered state of consciousness, but an ongoing process, lasting from several months to many years, during which the person passes in and out of different states of consciousness [3]. The process falls outside the categories of both normal and psychotic because a person undergoing the awakening has phenomena far outside the normal range, usually without becoming so disorganized as to be considered psychotic.

One could state that the awakening of kundalini is an energetic developmental syndrome that follows the evolution of the brain from reptile like symptoms like heat and cold to mammal like symptoms like shaking of the body to cognitive symptoms like dissociation to spiritual like dissolution of the ego. The Buddhist tradition, for spiritual awakening, describes four domains for meditation, bodily sensations, feelings, cognitions, and spirituality. Of course it is not coincident that the Kundalini symptoms

overlap the domains of Buddhist meditation. Important is here to note that kundalini awakening or spiritual awakening leads in the end to a momentary state with spiritual qualities. All the other states of mind and body the individual has learned and performed remain available. The table below shows the divers known major symptoms of the kundalini awakening process.

Category	Symptoms
Body	Spontaneous movements
	Sensations of some form of energy (almost like an electric current) circulating along the spine or the arms and hands or, sometimes, stored in the genitals
	Shaking and vibrating of the body.
	Tingling
	Spontaneous Kriya's (Yoga postures)
	Heat and cold sensations
	Inner sounds and lights
	Pain in specific parts of the body that begin and end abruptly
	Abnormal breathing patterns
Emotion	Variety of emotional states: ecstasy, bliss, peace, love, devotion, extreme fear, anxiety, depression, hatred and confusion
	Hypersexuality ad hyposexuality
	Cathartic release of repressed feelings
Cognitive	Speeding up, slowing down of thought process
	Moments of no thoughts at all
	Distortion of thought process
	Detachment, dissociation
Spiritual	Observing oneself, including one's thoughts, as if one were a bystander.
	Oneness experience
	Extra Sensory Perception.
	Dissolution of ego mind
	Equanimity

As we can see in the table above, some of the symptoms of kundalini awakening are the same as symptoms of psychiatric diagnoses like panic attacks, depression, and PTSD.

The process of kundalini awakening is not without risk. Especially on social media circulate horror stories about the terrifying impact of the process. Several authors report an intense crisis they went through during the process of awakening before reaching a state of equanimity [4]. One can get stuck in a phase during the process of purification of body and mind. For instance, body posture can become catatonic. The mood swings can be overwhelming and too intense to contain for the individual. Reality testing as an important faculty for mental health can be seriously be distorted. There are reports of merging with psychiatric diagnoses like bipolar disorder. Embedded in yoga or meditation practice the risk of complications is contained and minimized. The psychological labeling of the symptoms of kundalini awakening is then part of the yoga or meditation tradition and gives the individual support to go further trough the process. There are several yoga and meditation traditions like kundalini yoga, Kriya yoga and Osho Kundalini meditation who explicitly facilitate the awakening of kundalini. Whatever happens, how overwhelming, is then labeled as part of the process and thus so accepted by the yoga or meditation student

as a normal part of the process.

The awakening of kundalini is not restricted to a special tradition. It seems that this kind of energy is universally available and can be as easily awoken accidentally after trauma or birth-giving, as it can be awoken through tantra practice, meditation, religious practice or yoga. Another possibility is that the energy is awoken through initiating by a guru, so-called shatktipat, whereby the guru places his hands above the individual and awakens the energy.

The first reports of Kundalini awakening stem from the Upanishads in the 9th century BCE. The phenomenon is described as circular energy floating through the body. A later report is found in the Mahabharata chronicles in the 8th century BCE. Here the word Kunda is used as a bowl low in the back for the snake energy. Since 1951, 46 articles are published and registered in Pub Med. Another academic source is Google Scholar showing 19.900 results for kundalini in 2019. Using kundalini as a search item for Google one finds 25.500.000 results. In social media, on Face book, there are 339.500 members involved in divers closed communities for kundalini. Instagram shows 1.171.841 reports about kundalini. LinkedIn 15.028 results.

It is fair to conclude that kundalini awakening is an authentic phenomenon revealed in several traditions spread around the world and of modest but serious academic interest for further exploration. With a growing popularity in social media.

Anyway, before 2003 none of this was known to me. In 2003 my own psychosocial circumstances were on the surface very good. Married, two fine sons, working as a clinical psychologist in a teaching hospital, an assignment as university teacher, nice and big house in the country, a fine group of friends and a healthy body. But my marriage was in a severe crisis after 25 years. Couple therapy had failed and we were on the edge of divorce. My world seemed to collapse and no solution what so ever came to my mind. That was the reason I decided to go inside and applied for an intensive silent Vipassana retreat of 10 days. During that retreat, my awakening started. In the first three days, I felt a lot of bodily discomfort with a backache. I got all kind of memories of mutual destructive experiences with my wife and I made a firm decision that this negative spiral must stop. The fourth day the awakening began with shaking and vibrating of my body. The remaining days of the retreat were emotionally calm and serene even though the shaking continued. Some other visions about the circle of life appeared. I had an OBE and a vision of my passed away father in law with a personal message for me.

The years after the retreat was like a roller coaster, meditating early in the morning, participating in several Vipassana and Tantra retreats. The kundalini energy was very active and rushed through my body especially during meditation and tantra. I went through a period of hypersexuality, had multiple affairs, divorced my wife and had severe depressive moods. In 2006 in decided to join a Oneness retreat in India. It was there that I received Shatktipat or Deeksha and learned how to transmit this Kundalini energy to others. During that retreat, I experienced a state of Oneness with my ex-wife while she was in Holland and I was in India. It became completely clear to me that our marriage should be healed. The years after Kundalini smoothly integrated into my personal and professional life. My body kept on shaking, sometimes very intense, sometimes very gentle and comforting. The neutral observer was awake and supported me all the way. My life came in balance. I ended my affairs with other women. I expressed my unconditional love for my (by that time still ex-) wife. We started

to cooperate as mindfulness trainers in Circles of Awareness. In 2010 we remarried with both our sons as our witness. The process of awakening went on and the spiritual domain became more and more a naturally integrated part of my personal and professional life [5]. It is only till recently that I became to understand the nature of this spiritual awakening and could put the pieces together. With the help of many inspiring others, I now realize that this awakening is a natural evolutionary process. The neutral observer, the witness, the container is now working through me allowing others to experience the healing capacity of awareness [6].

From my experience, the key ingredient of this awakening process is the cultivating of the neutral observer. Stay present and add awareness to the process that is going on. Observe your thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Accept them just as they are. Allow change to happen. Use your body as a mirror for thoughts. Focus on the bodily sensations and see how they reflect your state of mind. Be aware of your posture and notice how your posture reflects your mood and core convictions.

Since 2019 I facilitate psilocybin retreats and have the opportunity to observe how participants experience spiritual awakening during their psychedelic journey. Psilocybin is known for mystical type experiences and the last decade subject of serious research [7,8]. Several of the participants of our retreats experienced intense kundalini awakening symptoms like shaking of their body and a state of ego-dissolution. My own experience with a high dose psilocybin retreat has been very intense. My body was shaking during 8 hours, processing a lot of energy and I dived deeper into mystical grounds. I met entities and deities who were very supportive and showed me a deep insight in the purpose of my life. During the psychedelic journey the neutral observer was active and supported me in integrating whatever appeared. In a way the psychedelic experience overlapped the silent Vipassana retreat. One could conclude that there are several ways to activate spiritual awakening, a psilocybin retreat is one of them.

Nowadays, for me the kundalini energy is quite calm. No more shaking and trembling of the body on daily basis, only incidental, when the circumstances are right. The neutral observer remains active and awake. On daily basis, I practice Yin Yoga and follow a routine of postures that helps me to keep a flexible, healthy body and mind.

The psychotherapeutic use of the neutral observer stance starts in the office of the psychotherapist. The therapist acts as a role model and demonstrates how one can compassionately contain the emotions of the client as well as of the therapist. And again here, shift the attention to what is happening here and now in the office. Notice the reactions of the body and stay aware of them.

In terms of psycho-education one could explain to patients that all stimuli have this quality: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The body unavoidably reacts on the stimuli at hand. A pleasant stimulus results in approach, an unpleasant in escape and with a neutral stimulus the body, the organism, just goes on with acting as it does. This is true for all organisms, be it one cell or a human body. The reaction is always there and the reaction is automatic. What a smell is for the nose is a thought for thinking. The body will react on a smell as it will react on a thought [5].

A pleasant thought gets naturally more attention and one enjoys thinking that thought. An unpleasant thought or frightening thought will elicit an escape reaction. Paradoxically the body can't escape from a frightening thought. *Freezing is the natural response of a*

body that can't escape from a thought. A reaction that is shown in the posture and experienced in the inner state of the body. If such a frightening thought about oneself or the world appears the individual gets absorbed by that thought and experiences a narrow state of awareness. The experience of the neutral observer stance helps the individual to expand his or her awareness. In that expanded awareness the experience of pain, sorrow or anxiety will relatively minimize and can more easily disappear. Nothing remains forever. Thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations are all temporarily. They come and go. The beneficial stance to disturbing thoughts and feelings is the stance of the neutral observer. The therapist compassionately demonstrates this neutral stance to the client. The client internalizes the experience of the neutral observer and applies this in daily life [9].

A process we can summarize as follows: *observe, accept and transform.* Observing and accepting is what needs to be learned and practiced. The transformation will happen by itself. Trust the process, keep on observing and don't get in the way of change.

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