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## SERPENT FIRE:

### Kundalini And Spiritual Crisis

by [SilverDrake Fey](#)

The significance of the element of fire in the cultivation and evolution of spiritual consciousness has impressed itself upon many students and practitioners of Eastern and Western mystical or spiritual paths. In the phenomenon known as Kundalini awakening, or "serpent fire", an individual who frequently engages in an intensive spiritual practice may quite suddenly - or even over a period of weeks, months or years - experience instances of explosive expansion of consciousness. The following are examples of spiritual exercises which, when practiced with consistent frequency, are associated with awakening the serpent fire: meditation, yogic breathing, yoga, ritual dancing, chanting, asceticism, ritual (Tantric) sexuality, or any combination of the above. The typically dramatic increase in spiritual awareness attained through Kundalini awakening is quite often accompanied by physical sensations of heat or electricity rising in a serpentine fashion from the base of the spine toward the top of the head. Hence the name "serpent fire."

The rising of serpent fire can carry mixed blessings. It often leads to an increase in intuitive or psychic abilities. Persons who report Kundalini awakening also frequently acknowledge a deeper, more intense connection to the earth itself, an acute awareness of consciousness associated with the entire planet. However, when these experiences occur suddenly and without adequate preparation or warning, they may also be associated with unprecedented levels of psychological chaos and disruption of personal life. Unleashed, Kundalini energy may be anything but subtle, often ruthlessly burning away psychological blocks, insecurities, and barriers to insight. Kundalini could even conceivably precipitate a psychotic experience in the unwary or unprepared. However, when Kundalini awakening is carefully and intentionally cultivated, it is often described as an experience of the next level of evolution of human consciousness, and it may be likened to the experience of healing balms which soothe as they produce mild burning sensations. Kundalini Yoga is an example of a discipline which has as its aim preparation for and safe elicitation of a Kundalini awakening. It is performed under the guidance of a teacher or guru over a period of years.

Gopi Krishna, a middle-class government official in India, detailed a complex account of his own Kundalini awakening as a consequence of 17 years of practice of meditation and yoga. He describes the general experience in the following way:

"A new center presently dormant in the average man or woman has to be activated and a more powerful stream of psychic energy must rise into the head from the base of the spine to enable human consciousness to transcend the normal limits. This is the final phase of the present evolutionary impulse in man...Here reason yields to intuition and revelation appears to guide the steps of humankind...This mechanism, known as Kundalini, is the real cause of all genuine spiritual...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... " (Krishna, 1971, p. 243)

Despite his longtime practice of meditation, Krishna was stunned by the unexpectedness and ferocious vitality of the experience, which for him lasted well over a decade before it subsided. During this time period, he struggled in silence with bizarre sensory hallucinations, strange illnesses, and extreme nausea and indigestion where specific types of foods were concerned. When these "psychotic" symptoms disappeared, he reported dramatically improved memory, concentration, and control over his autonomic nervous system. He also experienced paranormal abilities such as precognition and the ability to write and understand foreign languages to which he had never been exposed.

Once the serpent fire is awakened, it is frequently experienced as moving up one or more energy channels of the spine, where it is thought to encounter and open up approximately seven energy centers known as chakras, ascending until ultimately reaching the top of the head. At this point the individual usually experiences a supreme awareness of the Divine, a connection to all, a sense of completeness or wholeness which is often referred to as "samadhi" in several traditions. In Sanskrit, "chakras" means "wheels", referring to their depiction as radiant wheels of energy located at various heights of the body (Judith, 1987). The existence and exact number of these energy centers has been debated, though most practitioners on spiritual paths associated with Kundalini awakening accept the reality of these energy centers and number them at seven (White, 1990).

Interestingly, Western alchemical drawings have been found which illustrate seven energy centers of the body corresponding quite closely to chakras identified in Eastern practices. The Sufi tradition refers to seven energy centers known as "latifas" or "subtle ones"(Campbell, 1981). Chakras are roughly thought to be located in the perineum, the genital area, the solar plexus, the heart region, the throat region, the forehead just above and between the eyes, and on top of (or even just over) the head.

There is ample evidence of the phenomenon known as Kundalini awakening in other contexts as well. Taoist Yoga and Chi Kung practitioners make reference to a similar process, known as "opening the microcosmic orbit". Centuries of studies in Taoist contexts have revealed that specific types of spiritual exercises enable the opening of an energy channel which originates at the base of the spine, runs up the spinal cord to the top of the head, and continues over the forehead, face, neck and abdomen back to its point of origin at the perineum (Chia, 1984). As a consequence of opening this channel, the practitioner becomes capable of attaining greater spiritual wisdom, psychic abilities and control over the physical body. Sannella (1987) reported that in his studies of individuals who have experienced Kundalini awakenings, he uncovered a "Kundalini cycle" which sounds virtually identical to the microcosmic orbit. He found that physical sensations of heat and electricity often do not simply stop at the area of the crown chakra at the top of the head, but instead continue over the head and front of the body back to their point of origin. Students of Western Qabalah will easily discern an analog in this process to the motion of energy through the ten sephiroth as they correspond to points of the human body (Fortune, 1935/1993). In fact, dedicated practitioners of Qabalah may physically and spiritually experience what seems to amount to a Kundalini awakening or opening of the microcosmic orbit. In this context, energy is seen as moving through sephiroth rather than chakra points. Finally, although not much has been written about the connection between Kundalini and

Reiki, it is my suspicion that Reiki attunements have the effect of stimulating Kundalini or opening the microcosmic orbit. As a consequence of personal Reiki attunements, I have experienced sensations and phenomena akin to what is described in the Kundalini experience. In fact, the process in which the Reiki Master passes an attunement to the Initiate calls to mind the phenomenon of "shaktipat" in Siddha Yoga, in which the guru or teacher awakens the Kundalini of the student through physical touch, but only when the student is physically, mentally, and spiritually prepared for the experience. In Reiki, Reiki Spirit seems to set in place some sort of safeguard system which protects the Initiate from harm incurred in the rapid opening of new energy channels (Steele & Steele, 1998).

There are a number of theoretical accounts which attempt to pierce the shroud of mystery surrounding the experience of Kundalini awakening. Two examples will be summarized here. Bentov (1981) proposed a physiological model which endeavors to explain the bizarre physical phenomena associated with a Kundalini experience. Such phenomena include visual and auditory hallucinations (such as flashes of light and color and buzzing sounds), sensations of heat or electric tingling, and/or involuntary assumption of body postures roughly corresponding to classic yoga postures (even when the individual has had no experience with yoga). Bentov theorized that rhythmic breathing associated with meditation, chanting, yoga, and other exercises results in micromotions of the body which establish a standing wave in the aorta of the heart. This wave instigates waves of equal amplitude and frequency in the brain, stimulating areas responsible for visual, auditory, and tactile sensation in feet, legs, pelvic region, lower back, chest, neck, head, and solar plexus. Thus, stimulation of these centers may account for strange sensations of light, sound, and tingling associated with Kundalini arousal. Bentov named this process the "physio-Kundalini cycle". Bentov's model, however, does not explain the reported spiritual benefits of Kundalini awakening.

Other explanations virtually ignore the physiological aspects of the experience and focus on the psychological features. For instance, Halligan (1992), a Jungian psychologist, equated Kundalini arousal with the seven stages of transmutation of metals in the attainment of the coveted Philosopher's Stone, described in ancient alchemical texts. In Jungian circles, this process has long been held to be a Western metaphor for individuation, or the development of the Self over the course of a person's lifespan. Halligan showed how the raising of Kundalini to the crown chakra at the top of the head essentially equates with alchemical "conjunctio", the mystical marriage of opposites in any spiritual journey which makes union with the Divine a subjective reality, where the Self is fully formed. A conjunctio metaphorically creates the Philosopher's Stone, the Self, unity with the Divine. Therefore, for many Jungians the experience of Kundalini awakening is the Eastern version of individuation, though one which is simply less familiar to most Westerners. In this conceptualization, the spiritual practitioner becomes vulnerable to psychosis or other psychological difficulty when this experience of the Self, or of the Divine, happens too quickly and without adequate preparation. The person's tiny ego may shatter in the face of something so tremendous. At that point, the practitioner may actually show signs of "psychosis," symptoms which might be labeled as thought disorder, hallucinations, or delusions. The possibility of re-integration depends on the presence of supportive family and friends, the level of empathy and understanding in the therapist, and the point at which the "break" occurred. Usually, "later is better" in this case.

This article has given much attention to the risks typically associated with "premature "

Kundalini awakening, which prompts the question of how to address the unpleasant or frightening aspects of the serpent fire. Unquestionably, consulting an experienced guide or teacher at some point during any intensive spiritual discipline is a good idea. Grof & Grof (1990) provide suggestions and networking resources for those struggling with a "spiritual emergency", a play on words referring both to a crisis engendered by spiritual study as well as the emergence of spiritual awakening. Anodea Judith (1987, 1997) outlines a comprehensive system for working with chakras as well as methods of dealing with psychological difficulties which may arise in such work. Moreover, she regularly provides workshops around the country designed as training for therapists in the ideas and methods which have emerged from her work. If, in your own spiritual practice, you find that you are having psychological or spiritual difficulties associated with a Kundalini experience or any other intense spiritual phenomenon, you may wish to consider contacting the Association for Humanistic Psychology at (415)864-8850. Alternatively, you might check out their website at <http://www.ahpweb.org> . This organization may be able to help you locate an open-minded or Pagan-friendly psychotherapist in your area. It is essential to find a therapist who will not automatically label as psychopathology what might in actuality be an intense (albeit difficult) experience of spiritual awakening. There have been instances (fortunately few) where individuals have been hospitalized by well-meaning mental health professionals working from perspectives which are not sensitive to psychospiritual issues. Psychotherapists who espouse a humanistic/existential, transpersonal, or Jungian perspective are usually excellent matches for Pagans and other individuals with alternative belief systems.

Bright Blessings, Dark Mysteries,  
SilverDrake Fey

SilverDrake Fey is a Sacred Path Reiki Master, and a clinical psychologist at a military medical center in San Antonio, TX. He has worked as one of the Centering Dome Coordinators at PSG since 1995. He welcomes correspondence at [SilverDrake Fey](#) .

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