

Healthy, Happy, Holy: A Study of Women's Experiences through Kundalini Yoga

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“Women are seventeen times stronger than men!” Yogi Bujhan, the man responsible for bringing kundalini yoga to the United States, repeatedly emphasized to his students that women are seventeen times stronger than men. While I do not know the reason he chose the number seventeen, I have learned through my ethnographic research that he consistently reiterated the strength of women because as he traveled throughout the world he found himself deeply troubled by patriarchy and the subsequent oppression of women. Therefore, kundalini yoga, as developed in the U.S. by the instruction of Yogi Bujhan, has been committed to freeing women from subjugation and oppressive norms. My research in particular set out to answer the question, “How are women affected, physically and mentally, by the practice of kundalini yoga?”

Defining Kundalini Yoga

Importantly, it is necessary to define kundalini yoga. Kundalini Yoga in the United States was started by Harbhajan Singh Puri, more commonly known as Yogi Bhajan. He was born in 1929 in what we know as Pakistan and then moved to Canada in 1968 to teach yoga. He only remained in Canada for a matter of months and then moved to Los Angeles and began teaching Kundalini Yoga. Yogi Bhajan was a renowned innovator for the Kundalini style in the U.S.

Most people are probably familiar with some idea of what yoga is, and kundalini yoga most likely incorporates those well-known ideas and images. However, it may differ in a few ways. Kundalini yoga focuses on spiritual meditations and chants, in combination with physical poses, to bring about the goal of raising energy in the body,

called kundalini. As kundalini raises it starts from the sitting bones ascending to the crown of the head. The purpose of this energy is to raise awareness of consciousness.

Kundalini yoga also employs a variety of breathing techniques that aid in the flow of energy throughout the body. There are breathing exercises specific for almost every area of the body, especially all the different glandular locations. So, through the use of postures, breath work, meditation, chants, and instruction the practitioner moves kundalini throughout the body creating physical and mental effects from that energy flow.

Kundalini is often represented by the symbol of a coiled snake. For example:

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

The snake lies sleeping at the sitting bones, and the practitioner's goal is to awaken the snake, or to awaken the kundalini, in order for it to ascend upwards to the head. When the snake uncoils and ascends, a feminine energy called *Shakti* rises through the body

meeting a masculine energy called *Shiva* at the crown of the head. When *Shakti* and *Shiva* meet, a union of bliss occurs creating transformation in the yogi or yogini.¹

Introduction

The goal of this research is to answer the aforementioned research question. The reason I chose this research project is two-fold. First, I had been practicing Hatha yoga for about two years prior to this project. Hatha yoga focuses primarily on physical postures, and is not overtly coupled with spiritual aspects. I felt like the practice of Hatha yoga was hyper-masculine, at least in the classes I had attended. There were always mirrors surrounding the room so you could look at how well you were posing, everyone seemed to be competing with their neighbors, and people would come in dressed in their very best expensive yoga wear showing off their muscular physiques. I began thinking to myself there must be more to yoga than this. So, after some brief research I decided to try kundalini yoga, and research the benefits it offered women.

Second, because I am a feminist and bring that perspective to my yoga practice, I wanted to explore a space that I felt like would be more conducive to that worldview. I knew of Yogi Bhanjan's efforts to liberate women, and I was really struck by the position he took on femaleness. Upon practicing kundalini yoga a couple of times, I immediately noticed a difference in comparison to my previous yogic experience. For example, in a kundalini class there is actually a spoken emphasis on letting go of the ego, not competing with one another, and each practitioner keeps their eyes closed for the duration of the class. Thus, right away I felt as though this would be a space open to my exploration of women's health.

¹ Sonu Shamdasani, ed., *C.G. Jung: The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), xxv.

Importantly, I must say that this research is focused upon kundalini yoga. Therefore, it is limited to that scope. It does not speak for all types of yoga and furthermore does not assume the results are applicable to all women. The findings are specific to the women that participated in my research. Therefore, I am not assuming a universal applicability in these findings. While some of the results may very well apply to women who did not participate in this study, I cannot speak with certainty to their experiences having not directly spoken with them.

Methodology

In my research, I became a kundalini practitioner. I participated in kundalini classes taught at *Inner Works Wellness Center* in Upland. Thus, methodologically, my research consisted of participation in the kundalini practice under the instruction of Gurucharan Singh Khalsa, who has practiced kundalini yoga for over 30 years. He also lived with Yogi Bhajan in an *ashram* for many years. Additionally, I took other kundalini classes taught at the yoga center taught by women.

I interviewed kundalini experts here in California and in New Mexico. The interviews in California were conducted in person and those in New Mexico were phone interviews. Furthermore, I created a short survey, through *Survey Monkey*, that I circulated online. I received about 20 responses to that survey.

In my interviews I asked questions about personal experiences in the interviewee's yogic practice. These questions included issues about what drives them to practice kundalini, how their practice has changed their life, and what challenges they have with kundalini yoga. I also explored the roots of kundalini, why kundalini had a strong emphasis upon liberation for women, and how those interviewed felt like

kundalini yoga changed the lives of women. My online survey included some similar questions and my findings are thus an amalgamation of my own practice, interviews, and survey results.

Since I chose to practice kundalini as part of my research, I think it is important to clarify my position about objectivity. I do not uphold an ideological belief that true objectivity is possible or plausible. Rather, and quite differently, I believe my experience is interwoven throughout this ethnography and I cannot separate myself from my research. Quite simply, even if I removed the word 'I' completely from this report, my bias and perspective would still be present.

Significantly, as a kundalini practitioner, I feel as though I was better equipped to understand the positioning of others who practice kundalini. When other practitioners explicated details about their practice to me, I felt like I better understood their explanations because I had experienced some similar occurrences.

Findings

One of my initial findings was that more women than men occupy yoga classes. This is a simple observation but because I am a woman, and a feminist in the Applied Women's Studies program here at CGU, I wanted to know why this reality existed. When asked this question one male interviewee said, "women have a greater orientation toward self-reflection and a greater desire to change what is wrong." One female interviewee responded by saying, "women in the U.S. are taught to have no power, but through the practice of kundalini yoga women find their identities strengthened and then begin recognizing their ability to create change in the world." Additionally, one of the questions I posed on the Internet survey was "Has kundalini yoga changed your human

existence? If yes, how so?" 12 women said 'yes' kundalini had changed their existence. The reasons why included responses like: "It has made me more aware of how to change areas in my life that need work," "It has connected me to the decisions I make. Therefore, I make better decisions," and "I now recognize harmful patterns in my life and feel like I have the ability to change them." So, in this particular research I concluded there are more women than men in kundalini yoga classes because the practice creates a space where women feel empowered.

For example, women can come to kundalini yoga after a long day of work where they have been paid significantly less for doing the same job as their male colleague and realize they have power to change that situation. This angle of the research elicited my theoretical basis, namely feminist theory, which will be discussed more at length below. However, at the heart of feminist theory lies the primary goal of liberating women from oppression, visible and invisible. Thus, a major end of feminist theory is to see women flourish and free. Theoretically, I believe kundalini yoga aims to meet this goal for women.

One female practitioner who filled out the online survey works in upper management for a large corporation. She noted that everyday at work she feels on guard and unsupported because in corporate America she is a woman working in a man's world. On the other hand, she expressed feelings of support in her kundalini practice because the process of raising mental awareness has helped her make better decisions in the workplace, rid her of negative thoughts regarding her current employment situation, and create a feeling of hope that equality will one day be a reality. I think my research suggests that kundalini yoga does provide a space of freedom.

Others when directly asked if they had experienced healing due to their kundalini practice reported, “I have not experienced any physical healing, but I have experienced spiritual healing,” “I have better health all around and feel like I am in a better mood consistently,” “I experienced emotional healing and letting go,” “Kundalini Yoga has helped me heal over a dozen illnesses in my body,” “I feel significant healing spiritually,” and “I have encountered mental healing.”

The women I have interviewed and engaged in conversation with have reported progresses like: freedom from migraines, negative thoughts and preoccupation with self, awareness towards the needs of others around them, healing from numerous bouts with depression, gaining a better sense of identity, being connected to the choices they make and making better life decisions, having the ability to change destructive patterns, and simply living more peaceful relaxed lives. Even though the scope of my study focused on the lives of women, I suspect many of those benefits are also applicable to men. However, there are some benefits unique to women like: smoother pregnancies and births, relief from menstrual cramps, and an increased strength to grapple with and change the subordination of women.

Another result I uncovered was that women are encouraged to explore their identities and discover self, in order to live a fuller more intentional life. For example, one female interviewee told me that Yogi Bhaajan believed before a society or culture could be changed, individuals had to be changed. In terms of patriarchy, women have to find their purpose and intention in life, or their destiny, and then they are capable of changing the universe. This is why Yogi Bhaajan said, “I want woman to be strong. I am a believer that when a woman falls a generation falls; when a man falls, an individual

falls.”

The kundalini community I joined truly acts and lives as a community.

These practitioners are very connected to one another and are close friends. One example of this community emphasis can be seen in the way every kundalini class ends, which is with the kundalini song. The lyrics are as follows:

May the Long Time Sun shine upon you
All Love surround you
And the Pure Light within you
Guide your way on
(repeat 2x)

Guide your way on
(repeat 3x)

So, a sense of wellbeing is wished upon one another, establishing a communal environment.

Furthermore, one expert interviewee told me that kundalini yoga emphasizes that women have the capacity to elevate society. He said Yogi Bhajan often said, “Women are not ‘chicks’ but they are eagles.” The institute Yogi Bhajan founded is called *3HO*, referring to the Healthy, Happy, and Holy Organization. This institute is now international, training kundalini instructors and offering camps for women to attend.

Their website www.3ho.org has a page specifically dedicated to the lives of women. The following quote from that website is a well articulated summation of what I found the kundalini community aims to emphasize about women:

According to the 3HO lifestyle, a woman is referred to as a "Shakti" which means Primal Creative Power. As a woman you are fundamentally equipped with this creative principle of the Universe. When you relate to your true self then you tap into this well of unlimited resources. You experience your power; you begin to realize the depth of your own strength and wisdom; you witness the power of your prayer to manifest. You are self-cleansing, self-regenerating, self-illuminating, self-rejuvenating. Yogi Bhajan dedicated much of his teachings specifically to

women with the understanding that women have the power to change the world one family at a time.

I do think that my research indicates women have a space to empower themselves within the kundalini practice. The sense of community, freedom, self-identity, support, and healing reported by women, and mentioned above, speak to this conclusion.

Theoretical Perspective

The kundalini research/practice has elicited certain theoretical ideas. Precisely, a theory of pragmatism has emerged from the research, practice, conversation and dialogue undertaken. In speaking with individuals and engaging as a practitioner myself, a pragmatic theory has surfaced. Individuals within the yoga community have experienced movement to a higher state of consciousness from time to time on their journey reporting those occurrences in conversation, interviews, and on my online survey. Some practitioners have declared they were better equipped to handle difficult situations in their life due to their kundalini practice. Others have said, even if they could not explicate their experiences of enlightenment in totality, they can declare with confidence they have had that experience. These experiences are real because they work in these yogi and yogini's lives, and a connection between thinking and doing is apparent.

Additionally, a pragmatic approach supports the aspect of moral agency unfolding in one's life with greater clarity. When a kundalini practitioner states she/he can better make decisions regarding convoluted issues, they express the idea that yoga enhances their lives practically. Thus, a pragmatic theory transpires organically from the kundalini practice because those committed to this type of yoga explicate significance through the lens of what actually works in their lives.

For the purpose of this research, I am drawing on the pragmatism espoused by William James. Charles Pierce and John Dewey were also pragmatists at the end of the nineteenth century, and contemporaries of James, but James focused his pragmatism on psychological and religious aspects of life, while Pierce concerned himself with science and Dewey ethics and social reform. The foremost connecting point between these philosophers though was found in the link between thinking and doing.² William James believed that pragmatism could be boiled down to one question, “Does it work?” However, for James, this one question, even if answered affirmatively, was not enough. A critical thought process had to be engaged in conjunction with the outcome for James’ definition of pragmatism to be fulfilled. Thus, there has to be a connection to conscious awareness and asking how an idea or practice makes a difference. So, the relation between thought and action is essential for pragmatism.

A second theory has arisen in this research embedded in the focal point of the project. As the aforementioned research question proposes, I chose to look primarily at the lives of women and how kundalini yoga affects them. The majority of the students at the center are women and I have predominantly spoken with women about their yogic paths and perspectives. Thus, it seems natural to draw on feminist theory and philosophy. Feminist Theory is rooted in experience and aims to achieve equality between women and men. Pragmatism and feminism intersect at the point of holding experience and relational community as essential aspects to understanding truth and reality. They both seek to undo absolutes and are concerned about the particular. In this sense, these theories merge with this yogic research because women have reported their

² Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 383.

own individual experiences are specific, each manifesting in various ways. For example, one woman may experience a feeling of bliss while another a great sadness by the same practice. However, both experiences are real and valid.

Although feminist theory only formulated in the 1970's, with the women's movement, a large body of literature exists within the field. I have a background in theology, and since kundalini yoga tends to be very spiritual, I chose to study the feminist theory explicated by Serene Jones. Jones amalgamates spirituality and feminist theory, which is appropriate for this study. Importantly, she notes, that feminist theorists study the lives of women because much harm has been done to women and women have too long been an ignored part of the population. She clarifies that an interconnection exists between the oppression of women, and other injustices like subjugations based on race, class, or sexual orientation.³ Likewise, my intent on studying women in the research is to highlight the need for such for analysis. My purpose is not to say men's experiences in kundalini yoga are not valid, but rather to say, in general, women's experiences have been ignored and thus deserve reflection.

Feminist philosophy is important because fundamentally it denies that human experience is solely male experience. It challenges traditional philosophies that tend to identify exclusively with men and not women. Thus, within feminist philosophy women's experiences are as valid as men's and the issues that are relevant to women are addressed. Truth is diverse and varied and the more feminist experiences attesting to truth, the better. For this study, I drew upon the philosophies of Mary Daly and Simone de Beauvoir.

³ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 5-6.

Mary Daly, in her philosophical work *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, argues that lust means more than the patriarchal self-indulgent definition of sexual desire. In Daly's terms, women lust after the hope that society can escape the dichotomies of femaleness and maleness bringing liberation to the oppressed and harmony to our world.⁴ Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949 and it was a groundbreaking feminist text. She argued women were the 'second sex' because men took it upon themselves to define humanity as male, leaving women as the inferior. She said that as men set themselves up as the norm or standard, women become the 'other.' De Beauvoir suggested that women had to start making their own histories and act as authentic subjects in order for society to re-orient away from patriarchy.⁵

These philosophies intersect with the study at hand since one of the primary goals of Yogi Bajan, and kundalini yoga, has been to free women from oppressive constructs. Theoretically, these philosophies explicate the problem and suggest solutions. Kundalini yoga in a pragmatic way, looks to the same end for women as these espoused feminisms. One small window into the equality driven practice can be seen simply through the clothes many practitioners wear. The instructor always wears white and many of the students do as well. When I inquired about this reality, I was told, "In India white symbolizes acceptance of all. Therefore, in kundalini, the instructor and often the students wear white to symbolize that all are welcome to the practice and judgments are not passed on the self or others." So, in the kundalini practice women find a place where they are accepted and honored. This creates a space where they can empower themselves and start changing their immediate surroundings.

⁴ Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984), 3.
⁵ Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann, *Twentieth Century Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Princeton Hall, 2000), 260-261.

During kundalini yoga a consistent reminding of the idea that consciousness educes thought, and thought brings about action exudes in the practice. Also, all change occurs by awareness to that need of change rising. Therefore, a deep connection to thought and action is present in the teaching and practice of kundalini yoga. Instructors and students alike recount stories of applying their yogic skills to everyday life, which again gives way to the importance of pragmatism within the tradition. The discoveries made through conversation, interviews, instruction during kundalini practice, and life narratives have only placed meaning/value on yoga wisdom when it was applicable. So, the experiences of women within the kundalini tradition examined in this research attest to a feminist pragmatic theoretical basis. Women are claiming their kundalini exercise moves them to a higher state of consciousness, which creates thought, that in turn brings about action.

Literature Review

I employed three main kundalini yoga texts over the duration of this study. The first was *The Kundalini Yoga Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* by Guru Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O'Keeffe. This book introduces kundalini, gives examples of *kriyas* (exercises) and meditations, and discusses the various components of kundalini yoga. It is a basic book that helped me become familiar with kundalini yoga, since it also shows pictures of different poses and the energy routes in the body, called *chakras*. The instruction of kundalini can be very abstract, but images like the snake are provided to visualize these abstractions. The depictions in this book provide visualizations of inner energy flow and inward transformation.

The second text used was *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Yoga* by Deepak Chopra, M.D. and David Simon, M.D. These authors argue that the Seven Spiritual Laws of Success, which are natural laws applied to human experience, are applicable to yoga. The laws are: law of pure potentiality, law of giving and receiving, law of karma (cause and effect), law of least effort, law of intention and desire, law of detachment, and the law of dharma (purpose in life). The law of pure potentiality educes the awareness inside of every human being, the law of giving and receiving asserts that the universe functions through exchange, the law of karma basically means you reap what you sow, the law of least effort draws upon nature's effortless energy to operate (like a flower that blossoms), the law of intention and desire captures the notion that awareness is influenced by motivation, the law of detachment encourages letting go in order to receive (especially detaching from material goods), and the law of dharma claims every living being with the capability to feel has a purpose in life.⁶ Because these laws attempt to get at the applicability of yoga in one's life this book interlaced nicely with my theoretical prospectus. Namely, these laws show the instruction of yoga can be applied practically in daily life. Since my study suggests real life change is the most important thing to the women I researched, these books, along with the theory, all worked in conjunction with one another. These authors bring the mysterious into the practical, the abstract into concrete, making yoga principles pertinent to life experience. I was reminded of this text when one interviewee stated, "Truth is the harmonious state between inner and outer realities—between interior consciousness and external, empirical data. When the two merge and are congruent, then truth emerges and opens our awareness."

⁶ Deepak Chopra, M.D. and David Simon, M.D., *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Yoga: A Practical Guide to Healing Body, Mind, and Spirit* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 49-69.

Finally, the third text I used was C.G. Jung's *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga* edited by Sonu Shamdasani. This book is a compilation of notes from a seminar given by Jung in 1932 at Princeton on the topic of Kundalini Yoga. In the 1960's, largely in part because of this study, the new age movement conferred the title of *Guru* upon Jung for his work in India and his mystical psychology. The majority of Jung's lectures were dedicated to explaining the *chakra* system and the meaning of energy.

For example, Jung looks at energy as intensity. Namely, he argued natural energy can only be defined by the way it materializes in say a waterfall or a fire.⁷ Likewise, yogic energy can only be defined by the way it materializes in one's life. Therefore, once again this text contributed to my theory of pragmatism and my researchers suggestions of applicability. All of these texts also stress the importance of staying focused in order to experience a heightened consciousness or sense of awareness. They talk about the 'third eye' *chakra*, which is the practitioner's focus point to aid the meditation process. Therefore, the texts provided a combination of theory and praxis. I found this helpful as I was new to the kundalini practice and trying to understand these unfamiliar grounds.

Conclusions

If I were able to continue with this research I would really like to chart some quantitative data. For example, I could look at addictions. I know that there has been a lot of talk lately in the yoga community about how yoga aids in breaking addictions. I would be interested in knowing how kundalini yoga helps women break addictive habits. Also, other quantitative research to include about physical health could fall under charting more basic health issues like cholesterol, blood pressure, sleep apnea, or diet concerns.

⁷ C.G. Jung, *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga*, 8.

Those I have spoken with about their kundalini practice have articulated that yoga provides them a sense of fulfillment. I have recorded their fulfillment comes from the freedom to express oneself, commitment to a meaningful practice, room for multiple expressions of the divine, and a motivation toward self reflection. Also, most of the women I have spoken with highlighted the idea that yoga connects them to the world, to the universe. This expression of connection aids these practitioners in discovering their life work and purpose. Thus, it is evident to me that as my research has come to an end, I can conclude that kundalini yoga bolsters health, empowerment, confidence, and a sense of community in the lives of women. This supports women physically and mentally, helping them to live lives corresponding to the kundalini motto: healthy, happy and holy.