

An Overview of Kundalini: The Serpent Bird

Introduction

Hatha Yoga comes from the Tantric Tradition where after the proliferation of Classical Yoga & Buddhism in India in around 6th CE there was a movement by yogis such as Goraknath and Matsyendranath to establish a new system of self-realization based on physical practices leading to the purification of the physical and subtle bodies. They refined previous tantric practices, removing the focus upon meditation and ritual, so that the **expansion of consciousness became a physiological/pranic possibility**; although, like all yogic paths, we must recognise that Hatha Yoga ultimately leads us to Raja Yoga where the mind becomes one-pointed and samadhi becomes possible.

Within Hatha Yoga we working directly with our subtle pranic energies to refine and balance the pranic body, prana maya kosha, so that this will ultimately lead to a chain reaction where our innate store of Kundalini Shakti is awakened and consciousness can be expanded beyond it's usual limitations. In it's entirety is a very intensive, **forceful path** however there is much to be learnt from it's study especially with regards to our subtle pranic anatomy & physiology, and we can most certainly benefit from it's most accessible practices.

Hatha Yoga, unlike other paths such as the meditative path of Raja Yoga, is primarily an ecstatic path where rather than slowing down our mind and pranic energies (enstasy) they are instead balanced and increased.

As Swami Muktibodhananda Saraswati says in the HYP commentary (1993: Ch4 v2) "Through yogic and tantric practices this process is accelerated. Just as scientists have developed the means to release nuclear energy from the uranium atom, similarly the yogis found a scientific system to release the energy and consciousness from the bindu within the body."

Aspects of our subtle anatomy & physiology

It is important for us to remember that the pranic body is the subtle counterpart of the physical body and is it's energy matrix without which it could not even move and would disintegrate; also that because it is comprised of prana it is more subtle even than space in the physical world and it said to be only become perceptible in dreams, meditation or after death states. This can be forgotten because for instance the chakras are usually named by their corresponding physical location e.g. heart chakra when a more accurate way to describe the chakras would be by their elements e.g. air chakra; this is because when open each chakra allows us to connect with the cosmic nature of each element, i.e. it's underlying vibratory nature as part of the workings of the universe.

Let us now look at the different aspects of our pranic body so we can begin to better understand this process.

Sushumna Nadi

We have already encountered ida and pingala nadis, the currents of mind (intelligence, thinking, emotions, memories) and life energy (vitality, activity, will power) respectively (HYP:Ch 2 v4 & Ch3 v4), but now to look in more detail at the central channel of sushumna nadi which lies along the central spinal axis. The sushumna nadi emanates from the 'kanda', meaning 'root' which is the location from which all nadis emerge. In the HYP the kanda is said to be located just above the anus, being one hand span high and four fingers wide (HYP: Ch3 v113) although modern commentators often describe it's location to be around or just above the muladhara chakra, starting just above the perineum and reaching up to the sacral

chakra, swadisthana chakra. We may imagine that the cauda equina, meaning horses' tail, which emerges from the spinal cord at L1 on the spine, corresponds to the kanda, although of course the kanda exists in the subtle pranic body rather than the physical body. There are three layers to sushumna where the innermost is the channel of fire, usually called the 'Brahma Nadi' since when energy moves along this nadi it leads us to an experience of Brahman, the Self. The next level is Citrini Nadi meaning 'giver of immortality or shining' which is said to be an extension of ida nadi, being the channel of the moon. Whilst the outermost layer is the Vajrini Nadi meaning 'thunderbolt' being the channel of the sun and an extension of pingala nadi.

The sushumna nadi which emerges from the 'kanda' travels up through the middle of the spine from the muladhara chakra to the ajna chakra. Muladhara chakra is the negative pole where the three nadis meet at what is known as the yukta triveni (combined three streams) and ajna chakra is the positive pole where the three nadis travel up the spine, crossing at each chakra, climbing over the head to converge at what is known as the mukta triveni (liberated three streams); pingala and ida continue beyond this point until they culminate at the two nostrils whilst sushumna nadi travels on to sahasrara chakra. Sushumna nadi is sometimes described as the place between the two extremes, known as the 'path of the void' or great pathway.

The granthis

Placed along the sushumna are three Granthis or psychic knots (Ch3 v106 to 107) and each must be pierced as Kundalini Shakti rises within the central sushumna nadi. Each knot ordinarily keeps us tied to a certain level of identification and attachment

The first psychic knot is **Brahma Granthi** located at the base chakra, tying us to the world or Bhur Loka, the world of matter, sexuality and sensuality where we are identified with the physical body and senses, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. It is related to being attached to desires.

The second psychic knot is **Vishnu Granthi** located at the heart chakra which denotes our identification to action and the world of I-ness or Mahar Loka.

The third psychic lock, **Rudra Granthi**, is located at ajna chakra, relating to Tapas Loka, linking us to our identification with thought and the dualistic world.

Finally as part of our pranic system to examine the concept of bindu and nada.

The bindu



Bindu is a **nucleus or point containing concentrated potential consciousness & creative energy**, it is the point of great potency (both Shiva & Shakti) from which nothing has yet been manifested. There are several bindus within the subtle body of which we are concerned with two. The first is that of **bindu visarga or Maha Bindu** located at the top back of the head. It is the **white bindu** represented as the crescent moon and dot in a moonlit sky (remember the symbol of OM, where this is the symbol for the transcendental state). Physiologically amrita (nectar), also sometimes known as Soma, is the secretion arising from the bindu visarga (meaning falling of the drop) located at the back of the head. Normally the secretion flows

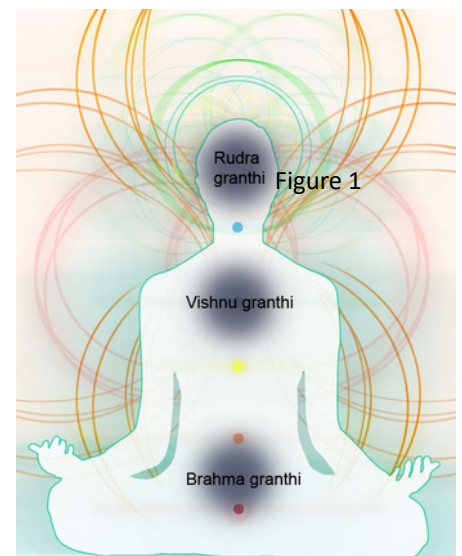


Figure 1

downwards, is held in a reservoir called *lalana chaka*, located at the rear of the naso-pharynx, continuing downwards to be consumed by *manipura chakra*. However when *vishuddhi chakra* is awoken the secretions are said to be able to travel throughout the body bringing great vitality and regeneration, removing the need for food & providing protection from all poison. Metaphorically protection from poison means that the world cannot bring negativity, there is no good or bad. The existence of this tiny amount of fluid has not been proven by modern science but like existence of the pineal gland i.e. the *ajna chakra* perhaps it will be one day. (HYP: Ch3 v77)

The other significant bindu known as **Sthula Bindu** is the **red bindu** located in the *muladhara chakra* as the subtle energy of the reproductive fluids, i.e. sperm and ova. Interestingly we can see how this concentrated point of consciousness and energy or the creative energy of the universe, *maha shakti*, is so potent that it can become another human. Ultimately there must be the union of these two bindus where the sun i.e. the red bindu at *muladhara chakra*, the negative pole (Shakti) must meet the white bindu in the head, the positive pole (Shiva). When these two poles meet there is an explosion creating pure light, transcendental consciousness, now the whole brain is alight.

In other words as we progress through the practice of Hatha Yoga and kundalini shakti moves beyond *ajna chakra* we reach Raja Yoga where the mind is one pointed. Here at the last stage of Raja Yoga we will spontaneously collapse back into the *maha bindu* as we move beyond the mind & body & senses into universal consciousness.

During the rising of the kundalini energy we can say that *ida* (mind) and *pingala* (prana) nadis are drawn together at successive chakras, the bindu rising upwards through the lower chakras; once however it reaches *manipura chakra*, the sun at the solar plexus, it is said to be stabilised there; i.e. bindu is now withdrawn from *muladhara* & *swadisthana* chakras. There is now transformed sensuality as will (*iccha Shakti*) and transformed passion as compassion. Physiologically it is said that now the hormones secreted from the pituitary gland flow continually, modifying the instinctive functioning of the lower two chakras and reducing the usual aging, degenerating effects of hormones being turned off and on to retain homeostasis according to the body's needs.

Nada

One quality of vibration is that it can create sound, some of these sounds we can hear audibly through our senses and others are beyond our normal auditory capacity. Here *nada* is **subtle sound vibration** experienced inwardly as kundalini moves. When the two polarities pierce the *granthis* there can be an internal sounds, varying from the sound of tinkling bells to thunder, the sounds becoming sharper and subtler as we move upwards. We are told in the earlier stages to keep our attention upon the subtler sounds from which the sound emanates, and indeed our mind will naturally converge upon it's source.

Interestingly today many authorities tell us that *nada* and bindu respectively can be compared to the wave and particle of modern science!

Kundalini Shakti

'Kundalini' meaning 'she who is coiled' or 'she who dwells in the altar of the earth' is the **latent primordial power** we all possess for transformation. It is located at the base chakra where it sleeps in a dormant state, being usually conceptualised as a serpent coiled three and a half times around the kanda, the muladhara chakra. [The three and half coils represent the three states of consciousness i.e. waking, dreaming and sleeping, the final half coil represents the fourth state of transcendental awareness.] In our everyday lives sleeping kundalini provides the source of energy for all of our body and minds activities but when awoken it can expand our consciousness, awakening our full potential. Throughout time and within different cultures kundalini shakti has been portrayed as a serpent; indeed in yogic thought traditionally serpents symbolize all electrical and pranic energies moving through the different channels in our own bodies and minds, as well as within the external world.

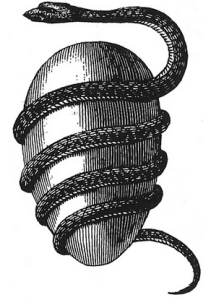


Figure 2

As Dr David Frawley (2015) says:

"Kundalini can be compared to a force like electricity that has no fixed form or location. The same electricity in our house can run a heater or a refrigerator, a sewing machine, or a computer. We cannot identify the nature, form or location of the electrical energy according to that of the different machines that it operates. Though there are electrical circuits in the house, the electricity itself can operate other houses and has an existence apart from anything that runs under its power.

The basis of misunderstandings about Kundalini rests upon looking at Kundalini primarily in physical terms. While Kundalini as the root energy of consciousness has ramifications down to the nervous system, it is subtle in nature and dwells on a higher existence that either body or mind. It is ultimately a power that pervades all of existence, a portion of universal Shakti.

[We can see] The physical reduction of Kundalini as part of modern yoga approaches that look at Yoga primarily from a physical standpoint as an asana practice. Yet just as modern physics is teaching us how to deconstruct physical reality and see physical objects as but force fields existing in space Tantric Yoga shows us that behind our apparent dense physical body are subtle energy fields that transcend all physical boundaries of time, place and person. This is what Kundalini is really about." p 194

It is important to note that the primal energy of Kundalini is the energy of Consciousness so as Frawley (2015) says "Kundalini, though energetic in nature, is no mere unconscious or inanimate force like electricity." p196 In this way from time immemorial it has been characterised by Maha Shakti the Great Goddess or Mother embodying the conscious intelligence of this Great force of nature.

The path to awakening

The awakening of kundalini follows a four fold path where:

1. first we must purify, strengthen & balance the nadis, balancing ida & pingala
2. then the chakras are awakened
3. then sushumna nadi is awakened
4. and finally kundalini can be awoken

1. The practices of hatha yoga help to purify, strengthen & balance the nadis, especially asana and pranayama. Normally ida conducting consciousness, and pingala conducting the life force, fluctuate in dominance influencing all the body's activities. At first there are only seconds when both ida and pingala operate simultaneously causing sushumna to flow, as the flow changes from ida to pingala and vice versa but over time this period lengthens. When both ida and pingala are balanced then it becomes possible for sushumna, the central nadi, to become activated.

2. There should be an organic, gentle awakening of the chakras through asana, pranayama, mantra, bandha etc. Sometimes the lower two chakras are already awakened i.e. purified, and purification is required in the remaining chakras. If this is done gently then we are unlikely to experience explosive emotions.

In terms of electricity now the wiring (nadis) and junctions (chakras) are ready.

3. When both ida & pingala nadis are balanced, sushumna nadi becomes active and initially movements of energy can be experienced within sushumna but these are not the full force of Kundalini, rather a preliminary clearing of sushumna nadi. At this point all of the chakras are said to face downwards.

Now it is as if the +ve and -ve channels are linked to an earth or neutral channel (+ve & -ve)

4. When all is in balance it becomes possible for Kundalini Shakti herself to stir awake and if the preceding steps have been taken she can rise unimpeded, as if by a powerful magnetic force, to the ajna chakra, breaking through the granthis as she rises through the sushumna. As Maha Shakti awakens and travels through sushumna nadi the Void or state of Shunya will be experienced as the experience of no-thingness. Then with grace upon reaching sahasrara chakra we may merge with maha bindu. If however we attempt to lift kundalini before the initial three steps are taken then an obstruction along sushumna may force kundalini shakti into a particular chakra where it can cause physical & psychological problems. That said to the greatest degree there are inbuilt safety features and if kundalini rises and is obstructed it will simply fall and become latent once again.

For ourselves, as householders, it is often recommended that as well as practicing some Hatha Yoga, we also practice some Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and Raja Yoga to help us find psychological balance. This is especially helpful because it is said that to awaken the three lowest chakras can give rise to many difficult issues, as they relate to areas of the brain where samskaras are held, i.e. hold latent memories, tendencies etc. and these will bubble up into consciousness.

This is especially true for swadisthasana chakra which can be seen to be the storehouse of our unconscious karma, from this life and others, meaning unless this area is 'purified' kundalini may rise from muladhara repeatedly to be met by this obstacle in swadisthasana and descend again. When swadisthana is awakened we must be prepared to experience the mental confusion it brings, and for this traditionally the Guru was a guide.

Indeed it is often said that ideally ajna chakra is awoken first so that we will then have the insight and necessary detachment to more easily experience what the lower chakras bring forth as they awaken.

Note: that if we are sensitive to it we may initially experience an initial descent of energy prior to stage 4 where kundalini begins to rise.

Hatha yoga to Raja Yoga to Self-Realization

Hatha yoga has been achieved when we have achieved physical, mental, emotional and psychic equilibrium, where the body has become refined and strong enough to become a

vehicle for higher forces of energy (HYP: Ch1 v1). It creates the unification of chitta and prana (ida & pingala) so that now sushumna can be activated and kundalini can be awoken. Hatha Yoga is the 'ladder' to Raja Yoga where through its practices, especially that of kumbhaka, the mind becomes one pointed so that Raja Yoga has been achieved where there are no mental fluctuations and there is the experience of 'Oneness' and Bliss. Along the way as we see in chapter 4 of the HYP there will be Laya Yoga or the ever increasing absorption of the mind, especially into nada, the auditory manifestation of Shakti. Eventually the Ishwara Tattva is reached, the sattvic state of Shakti or creative potential of Shakti. Finally our consciousness must merge back into the Maha Bindu wherein there is potential Liberation as we become part of Universal Consciousness. This is the journey of involution back to the Source where there will always be some degree of transformation. (See four stages in HYP: Ch4 v69 to 76).

Interestingly this process is often referred to as the the Serpent Bird rising upwards depicted as a feathered serpent or a bird flying upwards holding the serpent; where the serpent is the Kundalini and the bird is Hamsa or our individual Soul whose two wings are prana and citta (vital energy & mind) i.e. pingala and ida.

Note that the force of kundalini is intimately tied to the brain where normally of the ten regions, nine of them located in the frontal brain are dormant. These dormant areas of the brain only receive pingala, i.e. prana, but not consciousness i.e. ida nadi. When a chakra awakens as previously stated the corresponding part of the brain is then connected to both ida and pingala nadis and will bring consciousness to these areas of the brain. And when finally kundalini reaches ajna chakra and travels into sushumna chakra the whole brain becomes alight, and as Maha Bindu explodes Shakti has reached her destination to be reunited with Shiva at the crown and we are connected to Universal Consciousness. There is now liberation from karma, vasana (unconscious desire) and ego. (HYP: Ch4 v11 &12)

Signs of Kundalini Awakening

It can be a gradual awakening over an extended period of time so that there is a partial ascent only and as long we are in a state of balance this can be quite mild in nature. But it can also rise up as an explosive electric charge, like lightning, and so we need to be prepared.

Experiences can be highly individualistic but generally:

- The spine becomes rigid
- Can be a feeling of explosive energy or strong vibrations within the spine, or more gentle trickles
- Can be tremendous heat where the Shakti has touched us then a cold lifelessness as it passes through.
- May be Inner sounds, known as manifestations of Nada, becoming sharper & subtler as higher energy frequencies are experienced.
- Can experience light within, such as seeing inner visions of the nadis
- There can also be:
 - Intense emotions, memories resurfacing
 - Disconnection from the external world
 - Possible headaches as new areas of the brain become active
 - Possible insomnia etc.
 - Fear, especially as we face the experience of releasing our 'personal self'

[Note: when chakras awaken the experience tends to be blissful with images arising & images of goddesses etc. from the collective unconscious, these may also be purely our own samskaras (psychic imprints)]

The Descent of Kundalini

During Samadhi when Kundalini Shakti has been united with Universal Consciousness, we are unaware of our individual self, we have entered The One, there is only 'being' beyond all time and space, and importantly beyond thought. Thus it is very significant that during the ascent of kundalini we are able to surrender our thinking and much of our preparation will enable us to this, especially through the experience of kumbhaka, or breath retention. This state of merger will last for some time and then Shiva and Shakti will separate as we return to the state of duality but now Shiva will descend with Shakti to muladhara chakra. The practitioner however will remain connected to his/her experience of the deepest state of reality/psyche and will necessarily have been transformed to some degree, depending upon how much of his/her karma has been 'burnt away'. Ultimately they will be able to full participate in life but not be identified with it, existing in a state of being without attachment to thought or emotion, we could say being of this world and also not of this world. This is a jivamukti or liberated embodied being.

The question of the necessity of a Guru

Classical texts generally highlight the necessity of a Guru who has already trodden the path and has the ability to perceive what each student requires to develop and evolve. Here in the West this is rarely possible so what can be done? One of the best ways is to practice Hatha Yoga with great sensitivity to your own capacities, monitoring your own experience, keeping it gentle and balanced. Establish a regular meditation practice, especially developing the witness. Developing an attitude of surrender so that our own higher intelligence leads us and can grace us with change when the right time arises. It is good to also practice Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga to aid the development of selflessness and purify the chakras. Another powerful possibility is to develop a relationship with the Goddess or Devatas which can be done very directly through mantra, although this is more of a tantric route.

Whilst this journey through to sahasrara chakra may remain purely theoretical (for this lifetime at least!) but we must always remember that the practices of hatha yoga can be extremely beneficial for us regardless. They will help us in the many ways giving us physical, emotional, mental and spiritual balance; through working directly with prana we will all benefit.

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Summary of the Process of Kundalini Rising

11) When Kundalini Shakti enters the crown chakra there is the experience of Sat-Chit-Ananda, Being-Consciousness-Bliss, as the opened crown chakra gives cognizance of the Self i.e. Pure Consciousness. Karma can be burned away as the entire brain alights. Now as Shiva & Shakti descend together, our consciousness is transformed and we become Jivatman, a Liberated Being who sees the world as a wondrous play, now our knowing is not dependent upon our mind & senses. We are now linked to the formally unreachable reservoir of wisdom as we return to duality. Shiva, Pure Consciousness, has descended into this world. Shiva & Shakti or Sun and Moon have joined together.

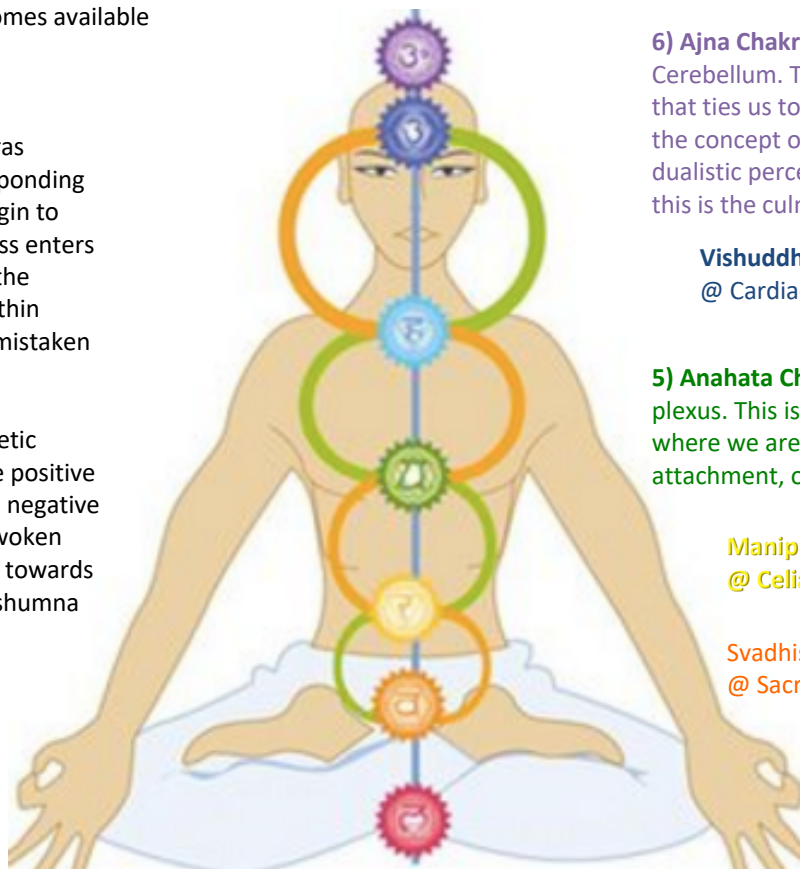
10) Generally 9/10ths of the brain is dormant where there is only prana, maintaining vitality but without consciousness, but when Kundalini Shakti, the energy of consciousness reaches Sahasrara Chakra the whole brain awakens and becomes available to us.

9) Note: If specific chakras awaken then the corresponding area of the brain will begin to function as consciousness enters it, sometimes however the movements of prana within sushumna may also be mistaken for Kundalini.

8) We are electro-magnetic beings where Ajna is the positive pole and Muladhara the negative pole; as Muladhara is awoken energy is lifted upwards towards Ajna Chakra through sushumna nadi.

7) The dominance of ida & pingala nadis naturally changes approximately every 90 minutes; When balanced however sushumna nadi can be activated and the dormant kundalini energy within the kanda awoken. It can now ascend through sushumna unless any of the chakras are obstructed.

1) The Kanda situated just above the muladhara chakra is the point from which all nadis emerge. It is also the location of the latent Kundalini Shakti.



Sahasrara Chakra: 1000 petals, Crown Cerebral Cortex

6) **Ajna Chakra:** 2 petals, Pineal Gland, @ Cerebellum. This is the point of **Rudra Granthi** that ties us to Tapas Loka where we are tied to the concept of individualism and thought, i.e. dualistic perception. When kundalini arrives here this is the culmination of Hatha Yoga.

Vishuddhi Chakra: 16 petals, Thyroid @ Cardiac plexus

5) **Anahata Chakra:** 12 petals, Heart, @ Cardiac plexus. This is the point of **Vishnu Granthi** where we are tied to Mahar Loka, emotional attachment, our relationships to others.

Manipura Chakra 10 petals, Navel @ Celiac plexus

Svadhithana Chakra 6 petals, Genitalia @ Sacro-Coccygeal plexus

Sushumna Nadi
Ida Nadi Pingala Nadi

3) There are three granthis or 'psychic knots' located at three chakras; these tie us to different realms of consciousness or 'worlds' & must be pierced as kundalini rises & transformation occurs.

4) **Muladhara Chakra:** 4 petals, Perineum @ Lower Sacro-Coccygeal plexus. This is the point of **Brahma Granthi** where we are tied to Bhur Loka, identified with the physical world, the material and our sense of being the doer, i.e. of action.



Vajra nadi (outer)

Citrini nadi (middle)

Brahma nadi (inner)

2) There are three layers to sushumna nadi, Kundalini Shakti travelling through the innermost layer "The path to Brahman"