

Kundalini THE YOGA OF TRUTH

In a world full of uncertainty, it's essential that we hold onto clarity and consciously reflect on our life. Through kundalini yoga, a practice that awakens the kundalini energy to help us recognise and fulfil our highest potential, we're connected to our inner wisdom and the truth of who we really are

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Yoga classes these days scarcely resemble the somewhat hippy vibe I encountered in my first class 20 years ago and have gained a respectable place among the fitness-minded from New York to New Delhi. In 1994, Bodypump and my runners were my best friends but as destiny would have it, an Achilles tendon injury led me to an eight-week Introduction to Yoga course at my local community centre.

The experience was memorable for two reasons: 1) I was irritated at how slow and

challenging the asanas were despite looking so easy, and 2) I left the class feeling relaxed and quiet. I suffered through my weekly classes, and some weeks later I realised I felt different – I was happy...genuinely happy. I asked myself how this could be – I was happy before, wasn't I? I had been sideswiped and the signs were flashing neon 'Welcome to the Path of Yoga'.

Over the years I have become a dedicated practitioner of yoga and it has played such a significant role in my personal growth that I share the practice with others

as a student and as a teacher. My practice has changed a lot over the past 20 years from a strong desire to do powerful practices like ashtanga, to a steady and strong hatha, to a call for balance with yin yoga and kundalini.

I recognise that it is easy to get confused about the various practices and traditions of yoga, however, master kundalini teacher Hargobind Singh Khalsa reminds us that yoga is yoga and it doesn't pay to pit different practices against each other. He feels "it is the practice, which enables you on a very real, physical, emotional and

inner spirit level to bring the energy and consciousness you need to know who you are and what you are doing, so that you can recognise the potential that is there waiting for you to find it and make it real."

Although considered a little unorthodox in the yoga world, I would go to a kundalini yoga class a few times a month because I loved feeling physically spent – yet deliciously energised to the core of my being. At that time, I found the teachers' white loose clothing and turbans, coupled with more hand mudra and mantra than I was used to, a tiny bit strange. Despite my initial awkwardness, I kept it up and I now practise, teach and study kundalini yoga in addition to my hatha and yin practices because I like the way I feel when I do it. It is called the 'yoga of awareness' and in a world that is competitive and perfection-driven, I was called to grow my practice in ways that would open the doors to simply experience. I am not talking about some mind-altering cosmic experience, but rather the transformational process of awakening to my potential of going to my edges and expanding beyond them.

"In the process of awakening the knowledge inside you, you reveal to others that change is possible and that life can be different"

~ Hargobind Singh Khalsa

Passed from master to student, the science of kundalini yoga has been practised for thousands of years as a particular form of tantric or laya yoga. Swami Sivananda wrote a treatise on kundalini yoga in 1935, however, it wasn't until an Indian Sikh named Harbhajan Singh Puri (Yogi Bhajan, born in 1929) brought the practice to America in 1969 that it was popularised. He adapted the practice to suit the predominating hippie counter-culture in America at a time when many were seeking. Reflecting on this time, Hargobind shares how Yogi Bhajan "was

amazed by the fact that we students coming from the 'West' didn't believe in ourselves – that we doubted our capability and our greatness. These were foreign concepts to him and which he refused to accept in us."

Yoga is not a religion but because Yogi Bhajan identified himself as a yogi and a Sikh, his early American students were encouraged to become Sikh. Thus the practice of kundalini yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan incorporates traditions from Sikhism, such as vegetarianism, not cutting hair, wearing turbans and mantra in the language Gurmukhi (literally 'from the mouth of the guru'). Many present day teachers have not become Sikh and continue to share the essential teachings of Yogi Bhajan in order to help us live out our birth right to be happy, healthy and have faith in ourselves.

Kundalini energy is represented by the image of a coiled snake or serpent at the base of the spine and suggests the flow of energy and consciousness within us. Through powerful practices that use the body (asana & bhandas), breath (pranayama), mind (meditation), sound (mantra) and hand positions (mudra), the endocrine, nervous



ANDY RICHTER/AURORA PHOTOS/CORBIS; GROUP MEDITATION AT KUNDALINI YOGA FESTIVAL/IMMAGINE

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THIS PAGE: Kundalini yoga class at Imagine Academy

and subtle energetic systems of the body are harmonised and cleaned, rousing the dormant kundalini energy and awakening the practitioner to a large source of energy and their full creative spiritual potential. Between the three lower (eliminating) and three upper (refining) chakras lies the fourth chakra – the heart (love) and it is here that the shift from ‘me’ to ‘we’ and from ‘individual’ to ‘universal’ occurs (union).

The structure of a kundalini yoga class typically has the following components: 1) tuning in with the Adi Mantra, 2) pranayama or warm-up, 3) kriya (complete sets of exercises), 4) relaxation, 5) meditation and 6) singing *May the Long Time Sun Shine* to close. The aim of each kriya is to guide the energy in order to create an experience and change in the body and mind. They are often self-descriptive with names, such as kriya for releasing fear, for detoxification, and for firing up the metabolism. The 60-to-90-minute practice is powerful and efficient, and students are often surprised to see how fast the results are. In a short time, clarity

and balance in mind and body are achieved.

Foundational to kundalini yoga is the notion of truth, or *sat*. In class, the mantra ‘Sat Nam’ is regularly chanted and means ‘truth is my name’ and it recognises that each and every one of us seeks to live truth as our identity. Not simply meaning honesty, Sat Nam encapsulates the meaning of our existence. With the commercialisation and practice-related trends it is easy to forget that yoga means ‘union’ and despite all this, as a practice it supports the practitioner to be happy, authentic and one with all.

The practice beckons us to examine our life and not simply to borrow knowledge from books and what others say – but genuinely inquire and reveal the knowledge within ourselves. “In the process of awakening the knowledge inside you, you reveal to others that change is possible and that life can be different,” says Hargobind. I believe that it is truth that so deeply speaks to the teacher within us and motivates us to continue to practise and share. In this light, Hargobind remembers how Yogi Bhajan would say,

“being a teacher is the highest calling of a human, the noblest of professions...because it has to do with awakening in the other person the spark that could change his whole life.”

Pedro Misle, a kundalini teacher in Barcelona was introduced to kundalini yoga as ‘an observer’ when his wife Daniela decided to quit her successful career as a chief designer because she wanted to feel more alive. He witnessed over some months how she radiated with beauty, happiness, calmness, strength and confidence, to which she answered “kundalini, honey”. Later, when assisting with a free kundalini class at a men’s prison, he again witnessed the transformational power of the practice when the toughest guy in the room burst into tears and reaffirmed his belief that it helps people to look inside of themselves.

The teachings of kundalini yoga are as applicable today as they were for the youth who sought freedom through drugs and revolution in the 60s and 70s. In today’s world we continue to seek meaning and face many challenges, fears and uncertainty in our lives and the only solution is to go deep within and connect to the truth of who we really are. Hargobind shares the words of his teacher – a man who wanted to offer something better to the world, “Do the breathing, do the asanas and kriyas, learn the techniques involved and sing the mantra songs your way, with your music, and you will know first-hand what it all does for you, but you won’t harm yourselves the way you are now.” Hargobind studied with Yogi Bhajan from 1970 until his teacher’s death in 2004, and in line with tradition he continues to teach, encourage and inspire others and shares, “yoga is worthy of your continued effort towards its attainment, because union is harmony, and harmony is love, and love includes everyone.”

I am grateful for the yoga traditions that have and continue to play a role in my life, and I am particularly grateful to my teachers and the kundalini practice at this stage in my life – a practice that gives me vitality, connection to my inner wisdom and inspires me to reflect and reach my highest potential. 🌿

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