

BRANDED BY THE SPIRIT

by El Collie

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(El Collie spent many years working on her book Branded by the Spirit. She still had not finished it when she died in April of 2002. I am now adding chapters from the book to this web site, but will leave the original material up as well even though there is some duplication. I hope this addition will help people going thru Kundalini awakening, or those in contact with people in this transformative process. El's experience was unique to her, just as all spiritual awakenings are unique. Please respect the fact that this is El's writing. But please feel free to share it with any individual that may benefit from it.)

Branded by the Spirit

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Chapter 1

HERE THERE BE DRAGONS

"The soul doesn't care at all what price we have to pay to follow our calls. Our happiness and security and status simply don't matter to it, although our courage, faith, and aliveness do."

-- Gregg Levoy

Kundalini is the mysterious bio-spiritual agent that awakens consciousness. In India, she is worshipped as a Goddess. I did not go in search of the Goddess; she came to me when I least expected it, pouring herself into me through megavolts of energy that turned my body into her electrified living temple. Throughout my life, I had caught glimpses of her in the shadows, not knowing what it was I sensed hovering there, as she patiently bided her time, whispering occasionally in a language I could not fully comprehend, "You belong to me."

My path is uniquely my own, which is true of everyone. Yet there is a universality in what I have experienced and learned from Kundalini which will be apparent to anyone else who has been graced by her presence. The specifics of the particular tangent my life has taken will seem strange to many and familiar to some. I feel it's necessary to highlight this part of life insofar as it helps explain my arrival at this juncture of my spiritual journey. The rest of the book describes the workings of Kundalini in a more general manner.

Behind the Scenes

"Many non-traditional people of the West seem not only to appreciate the "road" of the shaman, but also appear to have an affinity for the 'Medicine Way.'" -- Joan Halifax

I've come to realize I've been a shaman/priestess all along without knowing it. I spent decades grappling to identify my calling in a culture, which until very recently couldn't acknowledge or tolerate people like me. A unicorn in a herd of horses is apt to be regarded as a defective horse until the unicorn population explodes, which, thanks to Kundalini, is presently happening across the globe. But unless you have unicorn friends or happen to be a unicorn yourself, you may not have noticed.

My life has been a series of unexpected Shamanic initiations. (Kundalini awakening falls roughly under this category, although there are people who experience Kundalini who are not shamans, and shamans who never encounter Kundalini.) Shamans function as conduits for the Spirit. They are messengers who mediate the Divine and facilitate spiritual growth for their fellow humans through healing, ritual, art, music, teaching, prophesy, and magic. Shamans act in accordance with Spirit guidance, and access multiple planes of existence.

If that clears anything up, let me muddle it again. I'm not a shaman by prevailing definition.

That's been a problem all my life: I'm not exactly anything by prevailing definition. I've been writing reams since I was fifteen, but so paltry an amount of it has ever seen the light of publication that it's a stretch to call me a writer. I've had a flaming passion and prolific involvement with the arts even longer than that. While I quickly sold the only stuff I actually put up for sale (in a short-lived visual arts consignment shop in the early 80's), I probably fall more into the category of "arty" than artist. Then again, I hold myself to such towering standards than only a virtuoso could attain to them.

I've spent thirty years studying and disseminating what I've gleaned of spirituality and metaphysics, though all of this was done informally, free of charge, and without emphasis on my teacher/counselor role. I read incessantly (and once tallied the number of books I'd consumed in my adult years to roughly 5,000). I've been a behind-the-scenes innovator in both the performing arts and spiritual communities, while remaining a minnow in the splashy public pond. I've lived on the fringes of the periphery, in the basement of the underground... and I've entered most every social edifice through the back door. Whatever it is that I am, it tends toward the self-made and homegrown.

Even so, my journey has been an obstacle course cum pathway carved out for me by forces which have alternately frustrated me and buoyed me along what has seemed to be a destined route. I've been pushed, prodded, shoved, lured and lifted to places where I never would have arrived if I'd been left to my own devices.

The way the Shamanic works in my case is that Power reveals itself to me, which sounds horribly grandiose, but I know of no better way to put it. Periodically, the Universe has grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and commanded: Here, know this Great Secret. Then it shows me something so far buried in the closet of the collective consciousness that I am left reeling.

Power has revealed itself in many ways, many forms, many degrees throughout my life. This is not to say that I am a powerful woman in any normal sense of the word. To the contrary, to all outer appearances, I am eccentric at best. Shamanic power operates differently than mundane power. It is given as a tool for spiritual service and in my case has been delivered in such a way as to be unquantifiable by standard measure. In plain English, it's unrecognizable as power.

Nonetheless, it has equipped me to reach and fortify people who would otherwise fall through the cracks of the cultural structure: fellow sensitizes, misunderstood mystics, frightened initiates, new shamans-in-the-making -- all lost in the metropolis of hard core materialism. Power has given me voice to call out their true names and destinies in a world which tells them they have no valid identity or vocation here.

I am speaking poetically, of course. My experiential knowledge allows me to help others receive the gifts which come in the strangest wrappings. I am able to serve those who have been unexpectedly anointed by Spirit; those who have been torched by the soul's flames; those broken in body, heart and mind by Life; those left standing raw and vulnerable at the side of the road to God only knows where.

I know how to reach out and help because Power has dropped me into the same situations and

taught me firsthand what it takes to survive, learn, and move on... That is the shaman's work: to climb one's way out of the abyss and thereafter be a living beacon of hope and guidance to others who have fallen and can't get up.

Again, I realize this sounds inflated and histrionic, as if I'm depicting myself as some kind of supernatural super hero in spandex and cape, flying to the rescue of the wretched of the earth. It actually works in quiet, simple, often guileless ways. I share what I know, I extend my heart, I offer support and let the Spirit do the rest.

As an eighth house Scorpio, I also have the unenviable task of retrieving everything sacred from the cultural garbage bin of the taboo: the perception of all things invisible, discourse with spirits, holy sexuality, all the Goddess sacraments, knowledge of animal and plant allies... In all of these, I'm aided by a growing cadre of emissaries devoted to restoring the lost wisdom of the divine feminine.

The selective sociopolitical "war on drugs" has demonized the most powerful of sacred plants, including the compassionate narcotic species and the gateway psychedelics. Of all these, the potent sacred herb tobacco has most retaliated, casting a curse on a world which has used it irreverently. Because of this, it is the most currently despised of all taboos, and will probably remain on the forbidden list longer than any of the others.

I've stopped experimenting with contraband drugs twenty years ago, but I still smoke tobacco. I'm not claiming that cigarettes are good for anyone's health, but the sacred is not about physical fitness. A great many seers, mystics and healers have been smokers, including Helen Shucman (who channeled the original Course in Miracles books), Elizabeth Kulber Ross, Stephen Levine, Jane Roberts, Edgar Casey, Peter Hurkos... New Age teachers standing on the shoulders of these luminaries often try to sanitize their memories. The visionary astrologer Caroline Casey was amused to find that the portrait, which hung in the foyer of the London Theosophical Society office of their founder, Madame Blavatsky, had been airbrushed to remove the perpetual cigarette from her hand.

A relevant aside: Richard Moss, an MD turned spiritual teacher, suspects "that people who smoke are already fairly sensitive and employ the cigarettes to ground themselves..." This observation is in line with what I have noticed about myself and certain other smokers. Whenever I tried to quit smoking, what bothered me more than the withdrawal symptoms was the mental fog accompanied by a startling increase in my psychic awareness (something not addressed in stop-smoking clinics!).

Once, after three months without a cigarette, I was experiencing outrageous telepathy, clairvoyance, and visitations from entities from other realms. What was most unsettling was an immediate materialization of any thought, which came to my mind. These were of a different order than the absolutely lucid and deliberate manifestations performed from the God/Self state. They were beyond my ability to control and seemed to be coming from my unconscious, from whence things have an unsettling knack of surfacing in their hairiest, most uncensored form.

In a milder fashion, while I was out walking (which has always been a form of "moving

meditation" for me), if I thought of any individual I knew, within minutes they would drive by or pop out of a store I was passing. Perhaps these were not materializations of my thoughts at all, but flashes of precognition. I never could tell which, and this in itself disturbed me. I worried that I was going to start manifesting scenarios from paranoia-hell, like the psycho/psychic kid in the movie, "The Twilight Zone." Thankfully, it never happened.

Much of my distress came from being so alone in my predicament. Had I been able to find another soul who shared some of these uncanny gifts, I may have been able to handle them with more aplomb. As it was, I learned quickly that trying to talk to anyone about these things provoked skepticism, fear or frustrating misunderstandings. True to form, establishing consonant relationships was of far more importance to me than being a species unto myself with weird powers.

For the record, the criteria for spiritual progress, is quite different than generally imagined. One does not have to be a paragon of virtue or perfection. I have heard from people who were alcoholics when their Kundalini rose, and from many whose real or imagined shortcomings pressed them to ask, "How can I be worthy of this? Why me?" When the same question rose up from my depths, a voice of quiet conviction answered simply: Because you were ready.

In every sense, the route I've taken is off the beaten path. My shamanic education has been traditional in the sense that I didn't choose it; it chose me. I didn't sign up for courses; I never attended be-a-shaman workshops nor had myself apprenticed to native Medicine women who abducted me for special transmissions. Until recent years, I didn't even know that my bizarre proclivities were following a pattern classically known as shamanic. Prior to the flowering of cross-cultural lore in bookstores and seminars in the seventies, no one I'd ever met knew what shamanism was. Even today, a true shaman is off the map in most people's model of reality.

Shamanism as I practice it has nothing to do with Voodoo witchdoctor Stephen King X-Files put-a-spell-on-you Hollywood special effects. It isn't about channeling opinions from friendly Azor in hyperspace, nor does it involve theatrical magick productions in which spirits come forth like genies from the lamp to do one's bidding. In short, it is neither evil nor fiction.

From an outsider's view, a shaman appears to be a wholly independent agent whose behavior is unpredictable and peculiar. Prayer, rituals, introspection, meditation, trance work, dreams and focused awareness are tools of the trade. Feathers, masks, drums, rattles and other exotic accessories are optional and are more associated with indigenous customs than with basic shamanic procedure. Being a minimalist, I make marginal use of such props.

In traditional shamanism, items like a pipe, drum, medicine objects and such, have to be given in some way by the Spirit in order for them to have sacred power. When these things are bought or improperly acquired, they are without shamanic value. It isn't the specificity of the objects so much as the energy they carry which renders them medicine tools.

At the most elemental level, the shaman relates to the innate consciousness in all things. As a small child, I talked to trees. I would climb up 15-20 feet high in the pines around our house simply to enjoy their companionship. I felt they were protecting me; although I often climbed up

where the branches were precariously thin and brittle, I never fell. There is an analogy here: much of my life has been spent, if not out on a limb, at altitudes where there hasn't been much in the way of visible support.

My tree-climbing was a portent of unsuspected forces gathering for my future rendezvous with the occult: "The climbing of trees in the process of shamanic initiation can be found in Malaysia, Siberia, the Americas, and Australia," says noted medical anthropologist Joan Halifax. Trees figure centrally in all shamanic traditions, being sacred in their own right as well as having esoteric meanings (such as the inner tree of life -- the central nervous system of the spine and brain, which very much resemble a tree).

The Native American holy man, Bear Heart, tells of a traditional initiation for children in which they are led blindfolded to sit by a particular tree to get the feel of it: "Be with this tree, touch it, hug it, lean against it, stand by it. Learn something from it." Later, the child would be able to find her way back to her particular tree just by touching the tree, or by being intuitively drawn to it. "That's how we began to connect," says Bear Heart. "It's amazing what you can feel from a tree. It can give us energy... That's why my people have great respect for trees. The trees are our relatives -- we call them `tall standing brothers.'"

My personal bond with tall standing brothers continues to this day. When I was having trouble recuperating from a knock down flu, a friend who considered himself a metaphysician insisted I accompany him on a trip to the woods to hug a tree because trees emit powerful healing energies. I had no problem with his idea, but when we found a secluded eucalyptus grove, I immediately felt wave after wave of fear and pain from the tree I touched. My friend, who had also embraced a nearby tree, was upset with me for "projecting my anxieties" and insisted that trees only resonate peace and tranquility.

I was perplexed too until, while coming home, we passed a work crew a mile down the road which had begun sawing off branches and tree tops in a pruning frenzy. "That," I motioned to the carnage, "is what was messing up my tree."

I've always instinctively known that "All that exists lives," as a Chukchee shaman told an anthropologist. For me, rapport with other life forms is less convoluted than communicating with humans. Mental imagery and emotion are the universal telepathic language. Although I'm seriously allergic to cats, in a lapse of reason, I'd allowed my daughter to keep a kitten named Sherman. As Sherman reached adolescence, he preferred spending most of his time outdoors, which cut down on the allergy factor for me. Our neighbors who had cats permitted to romp outside would stand on their porches in the evenings calling "Here Kitty, Kitty, Kitty...." I found it more dignified (and easier on my vocal cords) to stand in our open doorway for a few moments and silently announce, "Sherman, if you want to come in for the night, here's your chance." He always "heard" and understood me perfectly. Within seconds, he would come streaking up from wherever he'd been hanging out and dive into the house.

Once on a beach, I stood for a while watching some gulls as they soared in huge looping figure eight's far in the distance. Awed by their beauty, I asked them if they would come a bit closer so I could see them better. To my delight, they flew immediately toward me, graciously performing

their aerial ballet in the sky directly overhead.

I learned to make requests of the rain and the sun in a similar way. Since for most of my adult life I had no car, on stormy days it was hard to go grocery shopping in a downpour or carry sopping wet sacks of soiled clothing five blocks to the Laundromat. I would state my case to the rain, explaining that I needed to go out and buy food or whatever, and ask if at all possible it might clear up just a short while to let me get to the store. Generally, the rain stopped just long enough for me to get to wherever I was going; it would usually let up again when I was ready to return home.

I conversed with inanimate objects too. This was particularly useful when an appliance malfunctioned, since I rarely had money to get anything repaired. Once when my sewing machine broke down, I politely asked it to help me out since I needed to mend some clothes. I got a strong impression of jealousy coming from the machine, which at first made no sense to me. Then I realized I'd been spending a great deal of time writing with a new typewriter... and the sewing machine apparently resented it! After I assured it that it was a truly fine sewing machine, every bit as marvelous as the typewriter, it resumed functioning perfectly.

Until I met Charles, I didn't know anyone else who communicated with "objects." But others are beginning to come out of the social closet on this. The psychoneuroimmunologist Paul Pearsall has spoken about his recovery from the usually fatal stage IV lymphoma. Among other things he did to heal himself, during his radiation treatments, his heart told him he could "somehow actually connect with and influence the machine." He was so successful with this that a radiation technician remarked to him, "This is very, very strange, but you seem to get a much more measurable effect with much less dosage and time than most patients. What are you doing to our machine?"

I realize that while my experiences in this realm are not considered normal in terms of our cultural suppositions, they have actually been quite ordinary. Anyone can speak to 'objects' or animals in this way; it doesn't require any special psychic skill. But it takes shamanic instincts to honor the sentience and responsiveness of allegedly mute beings in a world where only crazy people and little children are permitted to believe in such things.

Much of my life has unfolded on a threshold between the mystical and the common place. What has been extraordinary is not so much the events themselves, but my ability to resist conditioning that convinced everyone else around me that such things were impossible. Through inexplicable grace, the creative, playful spirit at the core of us all, fueled by wonder and love, remained aflame in me despite the best efforts of the world to extinguish it.

As a child, I knew that communication with anything beyond our own species was taboo and I mentioned it to no one, not even to other children. It has always struck me ironic that humans imagined themselves to be the only intelligent beings on the planet while making life so much uglier and harder for themselves by treating everything else as dead matter...

Shamanism is a lot more involved than this and is scary because the realm of the Spirit is incomprehensible and tremendous in power and intent. When one serves as vehicle for this

power, one is thrust into inconceivable situations by unimaginable forces, and sometimes they play very rough. In recognition of the dangers of the path, the Chukchee speak of shamans as "doomed to inspiration." When you are summoned to be a shaman, you are forced to relinquish conscious control of your life. You don't write the script and you don't call the shots. If you try, you get yourself into deep trouble fast.

Shamans learn to listen inwardly, to distinguish insight from ego, spirit allies from hungry ghosts. As a shaman-in-training, you act on faith, usually feel like a fool, get in your own way a lot, and to your amazement, the Spirit still manages to make some good use of you. It takes a great soul or a very long time to be a shaman with grace.

As I've said, I'm taking liberties in defining myself as a shaman. Yet even for a neophyte like me, there is no such thing as a lightweight shamanic path. This is why I -- like anyone I have ever heard give an authentic account of a shamanic life -- did my best to resist the call. For other types of healers, artists and mystics, the call may be gentle. They may be born with gifts that blossom over time, or they have fortuitous encounters, which redirect them down their destined path. For a shaman, the call is more often a banshee scream, which leaves the callee -- and whoever else may be in the vicinity -- with hair standing on end.

In a world of materialist-reality and militantly rational values, heeding the call of the Spirit is sure to brand you a weirdo if not worse. If you manage to escape the scornful notice of psychiatrists, police, religious pontiffs, social-programmer educators, mortified relatives, busybody neighbors and true but concerned friends, you still have to do battle with the nether forces that take their role in your development with fierce dedication. No shaman, no matter how low on the totem pole, gets off without some close skirmishes with illness, injury, insanity and death. The more potent the shaman, the more harrowing the experiences.

Short of having the great fortune of being taken under wing by a master shaman who can show you the ropes (and these are about as rare as white buffalo), modern shamans are pretty much on their own. They learn from the fires and voyages life pushes them into... or they perish.

Chapter 2

BACKTRACKING

Beginnings haven't been easy for me. I was dragged into the world by forceps after my mother had been in hard, climb-the-wall labor for three solid days. Afterwards, doctors told her it was a miracle either of us survived.

I was a highly creative, intense, sensitive, vigorously active child. Being several years older than my brother and sister, I fell early into the role of nurturer and mentor which has characterized my life. I was forever involved in enterprising creative projects of my own design. One of the earliest I recall was playing a proxy "Santa Claus" to my little brother and sister. While they took their afternoon naps, I would work in frantic enthusiasm to hand craft clothespin dolls and box-and-spool toy cars as surprise gifts. While constraints on my time, skills and raw materials rendered these offerings quite primitive, my siblings were young enough to be nonetheless delighted by them.

I enjoyed playing with other kids, but I stood out from them in my equal love of solitude. My most cherished childhood refuge was the woods, but that was wrenched away from me in our endless moves from place to place. My father's traveling salesman job pushed us into what journalists were calling the "new mobility." Like all children who grow up rootless, the only constant in my life was loss. My parents were ordinary hard working people who took pride in my intelligence and enjoyed praise from teachers and neighbors for my display of emotional maturity beyond my years. The "maturity" seemed to me mostly a matter of dutiful compliance and adaptability to adult rules and expectations.

I made friends easily until adolescence. Teens were less tolerant than younger kids had been of my outsider status as the perpetual new girl, but the wedge went deeper than this. Despite the rebellious flailings of youth, my peers were developing what seemed to me a mental arteriosclerosis, constricting around superficial and callous social values. The standard caste system rewarding privilege, wealth and physical perfection always struck me as mean-spirited and needlessly divisive. When I was younger, I'd hated it when teachers made us choose teammates for gym class or spelling matches for the same reason. Although I usually got picked for a team early, I ached for the kids suffering the humiliation of being called last. (At home, when I played team games with the neighborhood kids, I introduced an alternative system in which the weakest and youngest kids were paired off with the strongest, so nobody wound up a "reject.") I was demoralized to discover that the same cruel hierarchies prevailed throughout the version of history we were taught in school, and were apparently ubiquitous in every social group in nature -- with the exception of ants and bees. (It wasn't until my late forties that I would find record of egalitarian communities based on cooperative interdependence of members in the ancient Goddess cultures -- and their natural equivalent among the gentle bonobos monkeys.) For as long as I can remember, I've been in love with life and mad at the world. My family had its share of painful dysfunction. The survivor thing has reached such cult proportions I hate to mention it, but it has been a formative slice of my life. Carmen Boulter, a feminist therapist and teacher, has postulated correspondences between mythological archetypes and patterns, which shape the female psyche. She identifies the fate of victimization and recovery with Persephone,

the goddess who was abducted into the underworld by the god Hades. The Persephone archetype is often lived out by the most emotionally and psychically sensitive child in the family, says Boulter. A girl in this situation becomes the family scapegoat. Members project their shadow qualities on her "perhaps out of her willingness to carry the family burdens." Typically, the Persephone type becomes a perfectionist and "too good," while being disconnected from her own needs. She feels lost and alone, since her true identity is hidden beneath the judgments others heap upon her. "Because no one else can see her, she loses her ability to see herself," says Boulter. "Such is the curse that springs from the original trauma of abduction." Boulter calls this archetype a psychological orphan for whom healing lies in becoming conscious of what is illusory and what is real.

She hits the bulls-eye describing my family dynamic. Whether due to karma, destiny or the darkness inherent in the times, I was subjected to abuses, physical and emotional. I won't go into sordid details; it would serve no purpose. I've spent too much of my life buffeted between anger, resentment and guilt -- the anger mostly turned inward, the guilt a reaction to my resentment. I tried telling myself it hadn't really been that bad. Wrong. It was bad. There are things you never get over, but after a healing occurs, you carry your scars differently. They are no longer simply memories of woundings, but spiritual brandings of lessons never to be forgotten. Being on the receiving end of assault, domination, coercion, neglect, injustice, betrayal, violation, disrespect and dismissal teaches the soul the utter ruthlessness of these tactics. When transmuted through self-love, this culminates in a resolve not to go there in one's dealings with life.

As a result of the ways I've been mistreated, I'm careful in how I treat others. I would have preferred the kinder tutelage of being raised among people who could model rightful relationship. Possibly, I would have learned the same things from this opposite, easier direction. Yet I would have missed the blood-knowledge of what it is to be bereft of such blessings, as most people in our ravaged world have been...

From a tender age, I was shouldering the weight of the world. I've long known there are multitudes whose suffering makes mine pale in comparison. I was six years old when the polio epidemic hit, taking hostages of my baby brother, my cousin, and a sizable portion of our stricken town.

By the time I was ten, I knew too well the meaning of atrocity. I had already read dozens of my father's book collection of WWII stories, including a harrowing survivors' account of the bombing of Hiroshima. The author told of people who had looked up at the light of the blast: their eyeballs melted down their cheeks. It was analogous to the way I felt, my inner child eyes charred with the knowledge of terrible things that no one spoke of. (Yet it was through reading that I discovered books gave me access to much that the world tried to hide.) More immediately, I knew, though little was said about him, that my mother's brother had been killed in the war, and my airforce captain father had won his purple heart after his plane was shot down on four separate missions. Each time he was miraculously rescued at sea. I seemed to have inherited his phoenix-like penchant for courting disaster yet escaping relatively intact. Security is a foreign word to me. As I write this I am sitting in our little bungalow house precariously straddling the Hayward fault, which seismologists consider the most dangerous earthquake zone in northern California. Just about every year they issue a warning that the "Big One" is ready to rip.

I've spent anxious hours in a basement with my family, waiting out tornado watches. I've ridden out blizzards, a hurricane, several massive urban fires and a major earthquake. I've lived without a car or telephone in slums so dangerous cab drivers would not risk picking up a fare in the area. I've gone desperately hungry, and I've been homeless long enough to know it is hell. These crises have left their mark on me. At the time of the Oakland firestorm, I later learned that most people evacuating their homes rescued their photo albums. When the smoke got thick, my son came by to drive me out of the area. Pathetically, I grabbed clothing, blankets, food... I was a Rwandan, a Bosnian, a Jew in the holocaust running for my life. Photo albums are the luxury of people who cannot conceive of what it is to have nothing. I've been stalked by a crazed ex-boyfriend and raped by an amphetamine-deranged stranger who lunged into my apartment when I was alone with my five-month-old baby son. In three separate locations, thieves broke in and ransacked my home. I've had my life threatened by a gun-wielding psychopath. The list goes on... I dealt with everything on my own. I never reported these crimes to the police and never turned to a therapist to help me regain my bearings after the trauma. I learned early to be emotionally self-reliant. The one person I was close to while growing up was my sister. Being six years younger than I, she was unable to be much of a confidant, but I took her under my overextended wing and did what I could to protect her from the world. My most dramatic feat of survival was in the wake of a suicide attempt in my eighteenth summer. I had been quietly and earnestly suicidal from age fourteen

Going to college had lightened up my attitude, especially after I fell in love with a sophomore folksinger named Larry who, at nineteen, was a cherubic double of Gerard Depardieu. Being with Larry had temporarily suspended all thoughts of doing myself in. Despite his disdain for me, Larry opened me to vistas I had not known possible. My own artistic talents had been put largely on hold since elementary school; they were unwelcome in a world that demanded I fill a more conventional niche. (I'd entered college with the idea of earning a degree in special education, thinking I would teach the blind.)

Through Larry, I sensed there might be a lifestyle more suited to my flamboyant, wildly creative temperament. His abrupt departure from school to join the navy (which took even his closest friends by surprise) broke my heart and threw me back into hopelessness. When I returned home for summer break I was so mired in gloom, my mother, who had never been sympathetic to my feelings, noticed it. She asked if I would like to see a psychiatrist. I couldn't imagine what a psychiatrist, or anyone else for that matter, could do to make a difference. Then again, what did I have to lose? I agreed to an appointment.

Dr. Malowski, my shrink, was a tall, gangling man who wore a look of engraved enui. He asked what was troubling me. The question was too large for me to answer, even had I been able to articulate to myself the reasons for my depression. I tried to say something about Larry, but Malowski's glassy stare did not invite the baring of my soul. He abruptly cut to the chase and asked if I was suicidal. Surprised to be asked so directly, I told him yes. The look of contempt that flickered across his face made me instantly regret my honesty. His thoughts were audible: "Why do parents send me their spoiled brats? These kids wouldn't know a real problem if it smacked them in the face."

He scribbled out a prescription for tranquilizers. So much for the hope he might be able to help me. I politely thanked him. I took the sedatives for a few days and felt as terrible as ever. Then I realized I could pretend to take them while hoarding them instead. I did this for several months until I had acquired three full bottles of the pills.

The final straw came when my parents informed me I would not be permitted to return to college. With that decree, the pinpoint of light at the end of my tunnel was extinguished. Hostilities had run so thick and long on the home front, I sincerely believed my death would have little impact on anyone in the family.

One evening, after everyone was asleep, I downed the pills. I thought I was erasing myself from existence. I had no sense at the time that some part of me might extend beyond death. I expected the pills to knock me out, neat and clean. After forty minutes, I was disconcerted to find myself still very much awake and subject to mounting violent muscle spasms. A previously unconsidered possibility sucked the air out of my lungs: What if the pills didn't kill me, but left me in a permanently damaged vegetative state?

Change of plans! I immediately awakened my parents with the news that I needed to go to the hospital posthaste. My father drove us the twenty-minute ride to the closest emergency room. Revealingly, my mother sat stone-faced in the passenger seat while I lay huddled alone in the back of the car. She refused to believe me and repeatedly described how painful it would be to have my stomach pumped... I was already floating in and out of consciousness by the time of the stomach pumping. As it turned out, I'd downed enough sedatives to kill a whale. From a comatose state, I heard an alarmed voice (a nurse?) say "We can't get a blood pressure," followed by a male voice ordering an IV of some medication.

In a disembodied state of utter calm, I realized that my actions might meet with success after all. I was afloat in the most wondrous sea of tranquility I've ever felt, before or since. From this ethereal refuge, I earnestly asked myself if I still wanted to die. The answer was an unequivocal yes. Not satisfied to leave it at this, I rephrased my question: "Do I want to live?" To my astonishment, the answer was an equally firm "That would be fine."

From this side of the veil, it hasn't always seemed so fine.

Cutting Loose

After securing my promise to take a newly prescribed, allegedly non-lethal medication, my parents relented and allowed me to return to school. The meds gave me amnesia. Large chunks of my daily life fell into the Bermuda triangle. I found a picture in my wallet of a boy I'd never met; to this day I have no idea what our relationship might have been that led him to give me his photo. When my roommate -- distraught over problems with her boyfriend -- borrowed one of my pills, she went into a catatonic state for five hours. I took the stuff three times a day! It's amazing I was able to function at all. Before I realized how disorienting they were, I once convinced my father to take one of the pills when he was in a particularly foul mood. My brother later said the medication came on while they were driving to the barbershop. My father had frozen with his foot on the gas pedal with the car at a dead standstill in the middle of the street.

He remained this way for ten minutes or more, unresponsive to my brother's pleas. I don't recall how they managed to get home...

As it turned out, I cut my formal education short anyway by dropping out of college at nineteen to marry Tim, a woolly haired young musician my parents tried to warn me against. As I was partly marrying him to escape my parents, I didn't listen. His parents warned him against me for essentially the same reasons: my budding bohemian demeanor was not exactly what his Midwest Christian fundamentalist family had in mind as a helpmate for their wayward son. Adrift and penniless, we moved from a tiny student apartment that we'd subletted in Kalamazoo for the summer, to a cheap hovel in downtown Detroit. Tim had grown up in the Detroit suburbs not far from where I had spent the last two of my high school years. The original plan was that I would work to support us while he continued school at Wayne State, as there was no way we could come up with enough money to pay tuition for both of us. I'd put up a weak argument against this arrangement, but Tim talked me into it. (This was in 1967, when husbands were considered the real breadwinners whose educations were thus worth far more than their wives'.) As it turned out, life was writing an altogether different script for us both.

Tim and I immediately became active in Detroit's antiwar movement. We marched in small rallies where getting bludgeoned by the police was understood to be a necessary risk and sacrifice. Fortunately, Tim and I were never targeted as martyrs for the cause. I surreptitiously planted copies of a magazine with full color, wrenching photos of napalmed Vietnamese children in the Detroit Public Library where I then worked as a clerk. The text of the magazine was written by the famous pediatrician/author, Dr. Benjamin Spock. When I took a copy of the magazine home to my parents, my father shouted that I was a "card carrying Communist."

I snapped back something to the effect that if Communists were the only people who cared about babies being burned alive, I'd be glad to become one.

"Wars always have casualties," he spat back. Then, with a look of angst that made my chest hurt, he threw out his arms, palms thrust at me, and cried, "I have blood on my hands!"

I was stunned into silence, realizing for the first time that this was the real issue. Behind the right wing bluster, my father was torn between proud patriotism and bitter grief. WWII had left shrapnel in his body and slashes in his heart. (Sadly, we were never able to talk about this on equal footing, leaving my father with the lasting impression that I had spit on his service to his country...)

Tim had been gung-ho about having kids immediately, and I thought I owed it to him to oblige. I had always dreamed of having children, but I didn't feel emotionally or financially ready. In fact, by late adolescence, I was having serious misgivings about bringing children into so horrible a world. I couldn't imagine starting a family with no money or decent job prospects for either of us.

Tim convinced me that I was being morbidly pessimistic. He insisted that even if we were poor, our kids would be happy and everything would work out fine. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to be wrong. I wish I had been. It broke my heart raising them in chaos and poverty. As Tim

revealed to me years later, it wasn't really that he longed for the patter of little feet in our squalid one-room apartments. Rather, he had a cockeyed pre-feminist era notion that children would cement our marriage and do me a world of good. When we met, I'd been less than the poster girl for domestic felicity, having spent my previous summer in a locked psychiatric ward for my near-successful suicide attempt. God only knows how he could have added this up to conclude I made a good candidate for motherhood. Amidst everything else, the Detroit riots broke out. Tim and I lived in the center of the combat zone. As tanks drove by on the streets and deafening artillery fire could be heard blasting away throughout the city, we spent our sleepless nights belly to the floor in our totally darkened third story slum apartment. We could not risk throwing a shadow; the snipers had the cops shooting randomly at any suspicious movement in tenement windows.

At the same time, rioters (and rumor had it, police provocateurs) were ruthlessly torching buildings everywhere. The air was a blanket of smoke, rage and fear. Some of the elderly white tenants in the rooms downstairs from us posted a handwritten sign declaring "Soul Brother" like a cross in lamb's blood on the front porch. It was sheer grace we all didn't go up in flames. A year after we had moved, we learned that our death-trap tinder box of an apartment building had been condemned by the fire department (bringing it up to code would have been so expensive that the owners instead had the place demolished).

In the wake of the riots, a fellow W.M.U. dropout visiting from California stopped by to enthrall us with tales of the new mecca in San Francisco. Within three months, Tim and I were off to the famous Haight-Ashbury. We were told that several weeks before our arrival, the throngs the media called "flower children" (among ourselves, in self-parody we referred to each other as "freaks") had ceremoniously performed a mock public funeral declaring the death of the Hippie. But like Elvis, the Hippie lived on.

In contrast to Hollywood portrayals of us as moronic dope fiends, in its best years an infectious passion infused the Haight, creating a sense of community which, as historian Barney Hoskyns has noted, "may never have been equaled anywhere in the Western world." We had come together not merely to thumb our noses at authority, but to live a Dionysian alternative to the repressive, stupefied, "plastic" ethos of America. The term "hippie" was a derogative form of "hip," which was imported by black musicians from the West African Wolof "hipi," which means "to be aware." We were impossibly idealistic, reckless and naive. The truth, of who we were as a group, lays somewhere between a saturnalia of utopian revolutionaries and clueless refugees. Admittedly, among us were the runaways and renegades drowning in a self-destructive frenzy of sex, drugs and rock n' roll, plus the more degenerate element of hustlers, criminals and outright psychopaths.

The fact that our patchwork vision surpassed our reach did not negate its power. The reverberations can still be felt today.

Between the birth of our first child and my second pregnancy (our kids were born 15 months apart), Tim notified me that he was no longer interested in monogamy. In the spirit of the times, we agreed to an "open" marriage. For Tim, this seemed to entail some kind of sexual triathlon in which he tried to score with as many women as possible. I couldn't emotionally separate sex

from love, while most of the men I attracted didn't know how to combine them, making for turmoil all around. In theory, "free love" sounded viable to me, fitting into my philosophy of inclusiveness and liberty for all. In practice, even in the pre-AIDS era, I never met anyone who was able to make it work. Jealousies, murky emotional undercurrents, ingrained notions of inequity between the sexes, and a lack of mutual understanding and affection turned multiple partners into a losing proposition where somebody always got hurt. After a year in the Haight, Tim and I and progeny moved from San Francisco (I was afraid of earthquakes) to languid Santa Fe, where we lived for six months until Tim's job at a gallery (and my unofficial position ghostwriting brochures for showings under his name) fell through. We turned back to California, this time to San Diego where a friend stationed in the Navy helped us get an apartment. A journalist friend-of-the-family who heard we were heading there tried to warn us: "Are you crazy? That's John Birch territory."

If we weren't crazy when we went there, we were by the time we left. It took us two years to scrape and claw our way back to the Bay Area, where no one wanted to kill us for our lifestyle (nevermind the earthquakes).

While we didn't make much of a living from art, we lived art. With a raucous passion, I crafted everything from our clothing to our furniture until every nook and cranny spilled over with my creative excesses. A writer who walked into our Berkeley house for the first time gasped and exclaimed to me, "You can turn a square room round!" To me, art was a means of play, of protest, of meditation and communion. (During these years I thought of myself as an artist; later, as my work matured and I grew more conscious of what I'd been doing, I amended it to "shamanic artist." This would have been considered a redundancy in primal cultures for which art and the sacred were inseparable.

In a playful act of counterculture boundary breaking, for a short while Tim and I produced a zany series of small paintings, drawings and collages with our coined signature term "XART." The tacit XART premise was a gallery sans walls, sans money exchange and sans personality cults. We placed the XART pieces on public display throughout Berkeley, stapling them at random to telephone poles already encrusted with layers of advertising flyers for every event, rally and political cause in town. We were curious to see if XART would catch on. It didn't, but someone (or more likely, more than one someone) either coveted or detested our aesthetics; our XART works disappeared as fast as we could produce them. In the early 70's, Tim and I were among the West Coast originators of performance poetry, incorporating costumes, music, stage props and experimental theater. Along with a poet-musician friend, we put together an amateur/anarchist (though mostly apolitical) mixed-media troupe. With a revolving door crew that varied in number from three to twenty-five, we called ourselves the Expoetry Express. Our primarily coffee house and cabaret performances were group collaborations -- neo-Dada/Surrealist self-satirizing affairs that followed the dictum: "Art is anything you can get away with." With titles like "Son of Hamlet" (an ostensible biker's operetta), our shows were presented free of charge. The only time we passed the hat, it was with a twist calculated to be a hit with the audience: we had secretly filled the hat with five dollars worth of pennies, which we showered by the handful into the crowd. Tim and I footed the bill for each production, which even at our micro-budgets were a squeeze on our always anemic purse. We occasionally crossed paths with more acclaimed writers and artists who were, if not in it for the money, more serious than we were about making

the right connections in the direction of fame and fortune.

We made everything up as we went along: our rehearsals were creative jam sessions where we made never ending last minute changes to the piecemeal scripts. In lieu of our general lack of discipline and structure, something invariably went askew with every performance. From the beginning we'd followed the cardinal rule: Whatever happens is part of the show. Ad-lib around it! On one occasion a guy from the audience unknown to any of us wandered onto the stage and became an impromptu cast member. In another performance in a San Francisco diner, one of our male stars decided -- without bothering to inform any of us -- to end the last act by stripping on stage and streaking naked out of the building. These little surprises kept things as lively for the troupe as for our fans. Tim's and my creative co-adventures fared better than our private relationship. After ten bumpy years, the marriage ended as amicably as we could manage, and my life was recast in the shaky role of impoverished single mother...

Down But Not Out

I'm a ragged individualist. -- Jane Ace

In a culture that understands only money, anyone whose passions lay elsewhere is apt to be regarded as an enigma or a loser. If you don't get paid for what you do, it's generally assumed that you're either no good at it or it's not worth much to anyone. Sometimes this is true. Sometimes it's a matter of economic disparity. And often it is a way of excommunicating those who do not properly worship the almighty dollar.

I have held all kinds of jobs in my life, most of them of the service variety and all of which have paid in peanuts. I recently received formal government notice that since my life earnings had been so low, I qualify for zero social security payments in the advent of disability or retirement... unless, of course, I manage to strike it rich in the next decade. I've worked the minimum wage circuit since I was sixteen: waitressing, cashiering, typing, filing, being an attendant for the disabled, scrubbing floors, toting barges and lifting bales... When I quit my last full time position as a University clerical worker assigned to tasks no one else would or could handle, I later learned that management couldn't find anyone to fill my position at my salary level. They wound up having to triple the pay by hiring three separate workers to take on a third each of what I'd accomplished solo. Aside from the need to secure my children's and my survival, I indentured myself to lousy jobs because I don't drive and had to find work within walking or bus route distance from where I lived, which narrowed the prospects considerably. Despite my performance record, my lack of credentials and absence of entrepreneurial ambition locked me into third world pay scales. I never could scrape up the funds to go back to school and complete a degree, which was only half my problem. During my twenties and thirties, I would sometimes leaf through college brochures in search of a course of study for a profession I might squeeze myself into without losing my soul in the process. I'm not suggesting that formal education can't lead to honorable professions, or that anyone with a degree has made a pact with the devil. I'm talking here of my unique predicament of having talents which can't be developed through standard avenues. A friend of mine in a similar predicament nevertheless returned to college to earn a MFCC so he could legitimately practice his innate counseling skills. He spent the entire four years infuriated by the hidebound theories and training techniques he had to learn to pass his

classes. All of it was incompatible with his far more successful empathic and sympathetic style of relating to his clients.

If my primary calling was as a therapist or doctor, I would have done well to follow his example, beg a student loan, and grit my teeth until I received a license to do my work. My problem is that my work is of a nature that can't be transferred to some other slot. Even in cultures where shamans are tutored by a master -- which is a faster way to learn -- this process takes long years of hard work. One of the most difficult tasks of the shaman is breaking through inculcated ways of seeing and responding to life. This is best accomplished by removing oneself from the sphere of ordinary human activities through solitary vision quests or ritual initiations. My responsibilities and circumstances did not permit this degree of withdrawal from the world. Instead, my spirit-eye was opened in the course of my everyday experiences.

It's unlikely this would have happened if I had not had the relative freedom of my *persona non grata* identity. I've never had to worry about what my colleagues might think of me (nor of jeopardizing my nonexistent career), and I haven't had any social standing to protect. I needed time and relative seclusion to incubate a yet indecipherable something which was inexorably germinating from within.

I labored under the guilty impression that had I managed to earn the right credentials, my children's and my circumstances would have been less wrenching. I am grateful to Thomas Moore, who confessed in his introductory notes to *The Book of Job* that despite his doctorate in religion (with degrees in philosophy, theology and musicology), his life had been a series of frustrations filled with economic, personal and relationship failures until he turned fifty. I was confronted, in my own way, with doors slamming in my face for some of the same reasons they slammed on Moore: my approach to life simply didn't mesh with the social gears.

An astrologer who looked at my packed sixth house with Mars (ability to act independently and be self-sufficient) squashed between the rock of Saturn (hard lessons, severity, deprivation) and the hard place of Pluto (power and annihilation), said it looked like the chart of a slave. He didn't know anything about shamans. If you check my whole chart for signs of that, they leap out all over the place. A shaman is foremost a servant, not of elite or tyrannical humans, but of the community (which includes the natural world) and of the Divine. But it can take quite a while to get clear what and how one is supposed to serve. The clues were scattered throughout my life, waiting to be put into perspective. On summer break from college (before my suicide attempt), my mother, an RN, got me a job as a junior nurse's aide at the hospital where she worked. The only thing "junior" about the job was the pay. I carried the same workload as the other aides, with the added boon to the hospital that I didn't require training. This was the pre-HMO era, when a hospital stay meant hands-on human care. Thanks to my mother, I already knew how to take a pulse, give an old-fashioned bed bath and a welcome back rub.

From my first day on the job I was at odds with the staff because I committed the sin of emotionally identifying with the patients. I tried to cooperate, but the other aides' cavalier attitude toward their work was unfathomable to me. I was appalled by the way they routinely ignored a light for help over a ward door to go on a half-hour break, leaving a helpless, needy patient unattended. I was constantly being called to the mat for bringing water or a bedpan to

patients not assigned to me.

I got into trouble several times for breaking ironclad hospital rules, like the policy that all bedding must be changed once a day, no less, no more. When a young man (not my patient) whose surgical wound had bled into his bed cover, plaintively asked me if he might have a fresh blanket before his family came in for a visit, I said, "Sure." When my supervisor learned I'd given him the blanket she hit the roof. According to her, what I thought of as an act of simple kindness had been in fact a dire error which might spell financial ruin for the hospital. "We must keep down our laundry bills!" she gravely alerted me. One of my assigned patients was an emaciated elderly woman in the end stage of terminal cancer. She was indigent, and never had a visitor. Her suffering was etched into her face, and the slightest movement caused her to shriek in pain. When she begged me to forego the daily bed change routine, I figured once every other day was close enough. After my supervisor caught wind of this act of insubordination, I was given a lecture on my inferior mental status and threatened with dismissal. (I understood that hospitals need to maintain sanitation standards, but I still think there could be room made for merciful rule bending on occasion.)

For some reason, I have strange karma with blankets and authority figures. When I was in my thirties, there was an accident outside our apartment building; a car had hit a young woman. My nine-year-old daughter came running to tell me. I looked out the window to see a small crowd had gathered to gape at the injured woman lying in the street. Not knowing how long it would take for the ambulance to arrive, I grabbed a blanket. It was old and tattered but it was clean. I rushed out and gently covered the woman, who looked up at me in bewilderment. The bystanders stared at me as if I had done something bizarre, but I didn't care. If I had been hit by a car and was lying hurt and alone in the street, I would have been grateful if someone brought me a blanket.

The first medic on the scene eyed the blanket and asked in disgust, "What's this?" He plucked it up as if it were filthy and cast it into the gutter. Now I felt stabbed. I didn't care what the medic thought of me; what hurt was the look of shame on my daughter's face. She was being informed that her mother had done an ugly thing. Gawking at someone in pain was okay. Minding your own business and staying inside the house was okay. But owning secondhand things was definitely not okay, and doing what no one else thought to do was not okay, no matter how much comfort it might give to someone in need.

My instinct to give solace has often run afoul of the world of cold bureaucracies and hard line procedures. I may have been a fly in the ointment, but most people on the receiving end of my ministrations have been glad to have me around.

When I worked at the hospital as a junior nurse's aid, the patients adored me. It was this -- plus the fact that at dirt wages, I worked harder and more conscientiously than the other aides -- that kept me onboard despite my repeated "mistakes." Another of my patients was Mrs. Peterson, an eighty-year-old diabetic whose leg had turned black from gangrene. She was admitted to the hospital several days prior to her scheduled surgery. During that time, she kept calling me "Mary." I repeatedly corrected her, thinking at first she must be confused. It slowly dawned on me that she was seeing me as the Virgin Mary. It seemed she needed to see me as Mary, so

thereafter, I allowed her what I assumed to be an illusion. After her leg had been amputated, Mrs. Peterson would not let anyone but me come near her. When her doctor came to check her stump, she started screaming bloody murder and declared that no one was going to touch her but Mary. A conglomerate of nurses, aides and curious onlookers amassed outside her room, while my supervisor charged up and down the halls, hoarsely calling, "Who is Mary?"

She was less than pleased when I meekly came forward. "She calls me Mary," I volunteered. "Well, get in there and make her shut up! She must let the doctor examine her."

I was escorted forthwith to the room, where a frantic nurse was trying to restrain a hysterical Mrs. Peterson. She stopped yelling the moment she saw me. "Mary!" I approached her bedside, where she lay looking up at me with more trust and reverence than I had ever seen in the eyes of another human being. Tears streamed down my face in reaction both to her suffering and to the realization that I was being given invitation to stand in, not just as an angel of mercy, but as the Holy Mother of God.

Feeling woefully inadequate to the role, I took her frail, withered hand in both of mine, and told her, "I'm here. It's okay." She fixed her gaze upon me and did not so much as wince while a doctor and nurse inspected her horrible wound. If they had hurt her, I was ready to kill them both. (You can bet I didn't look like Mary to them!) I'd once before been cast in this larger-than-life role when the teacher informed my fourth grade class that we would be presenting a Christmas nativity play. Cast members would be selected according to classroom vote. As the perennial new girl who nobody knew, I did not expect to be included. As fate would have it, over the weekend while performing gymnastic stunts in our tile-floored bathroom, I slipped from a towel bar and landed squarely on my head, earning myself a whopping concussion and a month's absence from school. I missed the cast nominations and the performance of the Christmas play.

It was not until I returned to school, after Christmas break, that I learned the class had chosen me to play Mary. When my mother told the teacher I would not be returning to school in time to attend play rehearsals, another girl was selected for the part.

I recall being overwhelmed when told of all this. I told myself the only reason I'd been chosen was because I had dark hair (not allowing myself to note that half the girls in the class had dark hair too). I'd done the same with Mrs. Peterson, unable to fathom that she had not been wholly projecting the Holy Mother on me. Incredible as it was to me then and now, the Goddess of compassion -- Mary, Quan Yin -- at times uses me as Her vehicle. This is not my doing. I'm not Mary, but eyes that are pure and innocent see Her through those who serve life with compassion.

I am talking here of a literal apparition of a deity. I have witnessed a similar metamorphosis in a precocious young poet/artist who seemed at the time unaware that he was being possessed by a god. His appearance suddenly altered, and I found myself facing the radiant countenance of Orpheus. There was no doubt on my part as the onlooker that I was no longer regarding a human being, but an Archetype. I was enraptured. This experience lasted for several minutes, five at the most. I had no idea at the time it happened what it meant. Now I realize my poet friend had received the summons too. This is the essence of the shaman: to make the Divine visible to the world.

From the time when I was the merest fledgling on the path, the Spirit was making use of me to touch people in certain ways, to open their minds to something they hadn't noticed before. I've had people thank me for having said or done something that turned them around and catalyzed beneficial changes in their lives, while often I haven't the slightest recollection of the things they tell me I'd said to them. These were times when the Spirit was talking through me, using me as its vehicle...

Being a shaman is a bit like being a unicorn in a herd of horses... one gets judged as a defective horse. The Muskogee shaman Bear Heart said his teacher warned him that shamans -- which Native Americans call medicine people -- are always somewhat out of synch with others: "No one really will ever truly understand you. They think they know you, but they don't know what you're thinking about, they don't know the feelings that you have... That's why, in a social situation it's very uncomfortable for you just to sit down and pass the time: 'Oh Yes, this and all that. Oh, isn't it wonderful, and, my, I saw a beautiful chair in the store window the other day. And, gosh, the way they were dressed.' These aren't things you can relate to when you carry medicine. So it's sort of a lonely road, but in the end, it's worthwhile..."

Although Bear Heart is miles out of my league, his teacher's words ring true. This is why the shamanic life is hard both on shamans and their families, who wonder why they can't seem to get with the program. Few understand that life engages us on an altogether different level.

Chapter 3

Lightning Strikes

The incidence of disturbances having a spiritual origin is rapidly increasing nowadays, in step with the growing number of people who, consciously or unconsciously, are groping their way towards a fuller life. -- Roberto Assagioli, 1965

Kundalini is most likely to rise spontaneously in people who are spiritually inclined, creative, sensitive, open-minded, and open hearted -- all risk factors I knew nothing about until after the fact.

After I settled in with my present husband, Charles, although my life was better than it had been in quite awhile, I was vaguely dissatisfied with myself, and sometimes remarked to him that I wanted "a brain and body transplant." (This private joke has come back to haunt me many times over. I've learned to be a lot more careful what I ask for, even in jest.)

When my Kundalini first erupted, I didn't know what hit me. I was not completely unfamiliar with the concept of a Kundalini awakening, having read about it many years earlier. I knew that Kundalini was the Hindu word for the mysterious agent, which unfurled the tight bud of human consciousness. I'd explored innumerable spiritual/metaphysical avenues, but never with the desire or intent of activating Kundalini. Yet some part of me seemed to have known this was coming. For instance, while my tastes run to the unusual, I surprised even myself when, just prior to our wedding, I'd bought a prophetic gift for us at a street fair -- a bronze casting of a cobra raised to strike!

I didn't connect my symptoms to the rising of the "Serpent Power" until five months into my illness. Prior to this, I had spent grueling months in limbo. Neither I nor my doctors, knew what was constellating my strange illness. (I later discovered this is a common dilemma for those in whom the Kundalini symptoms are primarily physical). I'd initially dismissed the increasing weakness in my arms as unwelcome signs of aging. But now something seemed seriously wrong. An enormous weight was bearing down on my chest, making me labor to breathe. I couldn't seem to get enough oxygen; I felt dizzy and light-headed. Having smoked for twenty-five years, I figured the dues collector had arrived.

While I draw the line at do-it-yourself appendectomies, short of emergency, I turn to doctors only as a last resort, after I've exhausted my self-healing attempts. Fortunately, I have been fairly healthy for most of my life. But this time I knew I was in over my head. Scared and contrite, I made the first of what was to become, for me, an unprecedented number of trips to various medical specialists. My dreaded chest X-ray came up clean. I was given an EKG for good measure, and my heart passed with flying colors as well. All the same, I stopped smoking immediately. The elephant sitting on my chest didn't budge. My symptoms multiplied and worsened, which at first I accepted as inevitable. I had no expectations that whatever damage I'd incurred would be healed overnight. I had tried to quit many times before and withdrawal had been a nightmare. But in the past, aside from the craving to smoke, the worst of the physical symptoms began to fade after a week. Much of my distress came from being so alone in my predicament. Had I been able to find another soul who shared some of these uncanny gifts, I may

have been able to handle them with more aplomb. As it was, I learned quickly that trying to talk to anyone about these things provoked skepticism, fear or frustrating misunderstandings. True to form, establishing consonant relationships was of far more importance to me than being a species unto myself with weird powers. For the record, the criteria for spiritual progress are quite different than generally imagined. One does not have to be a paragon of virtue or perfection. I have heard from people who were alcoholics when their Kundalini rose, and from many whose real or imagined shortcomings pressed them to ask, "How can I be worthy of this? Why me?" When the same question rose up from my depths, a voice of quiet conviction answered simply: Because you were ready.

Alarming Symptoms

The sicknesses that arise as a result of a calling are surely the highest form of illness -- a sacred illness which by its power makes it possible for mystical and metaphysical insights to arise... this frequently happens without regard to the feelings and wishes of the chosen one, who, in most cases, is not aware of the fact that his body is undergoing an initiation. -- Holger Kalweit

The symptoms of my as-yet-undiagnosed illness continued. Worse, my swallowing reflex had somehow short-circuited. When I tried to eat, the muscles that contract in swallowing simply refused to cooperate. I found myself gagging and having to spit out the food. I could only get down liquids, which depended more on the pull of gravity than the cooperation of my throat muscles. A month without cigarettes, and instead of the typical weight gain, I was steadily losing pounds. Concerned about my lack of nourishment, Charles crushed vitamins for me with a mortar and pestle; I daily dissolved this potion in a tablespoon of honey, which I was able to wash down with lots of water. This and watered-down baby food was my sole fare for weeks.

In addition to the swallowing problem, I felt a constriction like a noose around my neck. Stranger yet, I would go through frequent episodes of convulsive, repetitive swallowing when I wasn't eating. These would go on for anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, and were most pronounced at night, jarring me from sleep with a horror that I was on the verge of asphyxiation.

I returned post haste to the doctor. Now my symptoms were attributed to severe nicotine withdrawal, which I could not believe. I felt absolutely terrible. A great heaviness descended upon me, as if hundred pound weights were strapped to all my limbs. My head felt huge and filled with crushed glass and I was in a peculiar altered state; my whole body felt drugged or poisoned.

My two-decade study of healing had taught me some techniques for investigating the mind/body connection. With little other recourse, I tried to work psychologically with my symptoms. I told Charles that I had gotten an image of a squadron of "demons" clutching and swaying from my limbs in a Hieronymus Boschian frenzy. These devilish entities seemed to personify a lifetime's accumulation of negative experience: fear, anger, resentment, trauma, etc. (Much later, I realized how apropos this image had been. The rising Kundalini indeed dislodges this psychological dead weight from the system.)

I began to tailspin into terrible anxiety and near-suicidal depression, though, oddly, these feelings

didn't seem to be in reaction to my physical condition. I relapsed back to smoking. Though I felt guilty about it, it helped to emotionally stabilize me. After a week, I sought help from a professional hypnotist who specialized in breaking cigarette addictions. I told him of my previous "withdrawal symptoms." He thought this sounded extreme, but felt he could help me by tailoring my hypnosis session to include messages of well being and vitality. I was instructed to listen to the hour-long tape of my hypnosis session twice daily. I did this religiously for about two weeks.

All the same, my condition continued to deteriorate. I began to have trouble lifting my legs. I called the hypnotist for advice. He had never heard of this debilitating withdrawal symptom in his twenty years of practice, but suggested I continue to exercise vigorously to work the toxins out of my system.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to do any kind of exercise, much less anything vigorous. I was doing the best I could, but my ankles turned to rubber and my feet dragged and flopped sideways when I walked. My arms were becoming increasingly useless, and it was hard to move my fingers. I couldn't pick up small items, and I had no gripping strength. Just trying to hold a spoon was a formidable feat. By this time, both Charles and I were getting frantic. Off to another doctor. Once more I was told that I was simply having nicotine withdrawal symptoms.

I became a bedridden invalid, barely able to use my hands even to dress or feed myself. This time, I was given an emergency appointment with a neurologist. He immediately dismissed the nicotine-withdrawal diagnosis, and scheduled me for a complete diagnostic work-up.

Upon returning home from an enervating day at the hospital, a package was awaiting me in the mail. A month earlier, I had sent my first completed book manuscript to my first publisher. I'd been flabbergasted when they contacted me to say they liked it, it was well written, let's go with this. I was hooked up with one of their editors, who discussed with me ideas for layout and minor revisions.

The package contained my manuscript with a cover letter of apology. When it came down to the wire, it had been a toss-up whether to publish my book or another one on baby massage. The market looked ripe for baby-topics that year, so my book got the ax. I was too sick to care. I stashed the package on a shelf and didn't look at it again for three years.

I now regard the return of the manuscript as a curtain closing on the pre-Kundalini period of my life. Thankfully the book was never published! It was a metaphysical gust of hot air with a few gems of insight plastered in. By the time I looked it over again, my views on everything had changed so radically I disagreed with most of what I'd written.

The one good thing that came out of this was my editor's suggestion that I tone down the exclamation marks. I'd been running several exclamation marks to a paragraph. I think I was being symbolically warned to calm down, take some deep breaths, rest up while I had a chance. Something was bearing down on me that would turn the rest of my life into one long string of exclamation marks.

Under the circumstances, rest did not come easy, and if I had known how much worse things were going to get before they got better, I would have thrown myself off a bridge. Prayer was becoming the order of the day.

I was in and out of the hospital for more tests as new symptoms developed. An uncontrollable neck muscle tremor made my head shake back and forth in a palsied rhythm, even when I was lying down. Painless little muscle twitches developed over my entire body. I was advised that I might have an incurable and/or fatal condition. Myasthenia gravis (or perhaps some other rare autoimmune disease), brain tumor, lupus, lyme disease and ALS were speculated. With mounting fear, I began to suffer from muscle cramps and an awful systemic burning sensation. The spasms were affecting every part of my body, including my tongue, causing me to slur my words or bite my tongue when talking. The onslaught of symptoms grew outright weird, ranging from a prickling and tingling that roved around beneath my skin, to a horrifying sensation like toothpicks stabbing into my eyeballs.

All the medical tests came up negative. A dozen doctors, four of them neurologists, had seen me, all told. I was repeatedly informed that I was "an interesting case" -- from the mouths of physicians, an ominous euphemism meaning, "We've never seen a disease quite like this."

During this span of ever increasing disability and bizarre symptoms, I was doing some metaphysical counseling by phone. I use the word "metaphysical" loosely, as I was not adhering to any particular creed. Basically, I helped people bring a larger, more spiritual perspective to their problems. I never charged money for this work. I considered it an ongoing learning experience to be invited into the details and depths of other people's lives. It surprised me when I was sought out for my natural ability to do this. Strangers would somehow sense this faculty in me and approach me at parties or other unexpected places and pour out their troubles to me.

At the time, I was counseling a man who was calling me daily. Although I had reached a point where I could barely hold the phone, and had to lay down with it cradled to my ear, helping him deal with his suicidal depression was also salvation for me. His desperation took my mind away from my own condition at a time when nothing less gripping could have held my attention. What was interesting about this, in retrospect, was that at one point I suggested to this man that he might be experiencing spiritual emergence, though it had not dawned on me that this might apply to my situation as well.

One afternoon, thinking he might be able to heal me, my brother-in-law dropped by. He is an acupressurist with innate psychic sensitivity. As soon as he walked in, he became very agitated. He told us that the entire house was reverberating with the most unusual energy he'd ever encountered. Stranger yet, he said all this energy seemed to be emanating from me!

Charles and I didn't know what to make of this. We briefly considered I might be possessed by some kind of malevolent entity. But in my previous experience with astral beings, I knew that animals, plants and children were most immediately affected by negative influences. Our pets and houseplants seemed to be in fine shape. My brother-in-law's kids had come by with him, and while he was trying to do some energy balancing work on me, we'd given them paper and crayons to keep them happily occupied. After they left, I scrutinized the pictures they had drawn

to see if there was anything-sinister coming through. Both had drawn jubilant nature scenes, resplendent with child-scrawled greenery, birds and shining suns. At the time, I wondered if the charged atmosphere Charles' brother detected had something to do with the many people who were praying for my recovery. What else could account for the immense energy he had felt radiating from me?

The pain and fear of fast sinking into the quicksand of physical decline is beyond description. Without a clue to the real cause of my illness, I was simply terrified. Like Gopi Krishna wrote of his own experience: "I did not know at the time that I was witnessing in my own body the immensely accelerated activity of an energy not yet known to science, which is carrying all mankind towards the heights of superconsciousness..."

For several months, I remained in a state of near-paralysis. The physical pain came to a crescendo in the middle of one night. I awoke in agony. Every muscle in my body, from the soles of my feet to the top of my scalp, was writhing and wrenching as if trying to rip loose from my skeleton. It felt as if each muscle and tendon had taken on a surreal life of its own: a hideous internal mutiny of thrashing, serpentine creatures. If this wasn't bad enough, I was burning up inside. The very cells in my body felt drenched in battery acid. Charles was awakened to my near-delirious cry: "It feels like burning snakes!" We had no idea how apt a metaphor this would prove to be.

Soon afterward, I began to experience more classical, full-blown Kundalini manifestations. Heaven's gate did not swing softly open to admit me; it blew off its hinges in a silent blast, demolishing my circumscribed life. I was in a continuous, radically altered state for months, suspended in an etheric, oceanic energy. In Kundalini, I was immolated. My entire being became a transparency, a gossamer presence no longer identified as flesh and bones, existing as a galvanized consciousness in the midst of primordial, sacred forces. Nothing could have prepared me for the awesomeness of this experience, not even my past LSD adventures. Yet it would be equally true to say that everything in my life had been leading up to this. I understood with unprecedented depth and clarity why everything I had ever done or experienced had been necessary. I was transported to a place of lucidity that transcended forgiveness; no shard of regret, past or present, could lodge in my heart. With nigh supernatural acceptance, I saw that everything made perfect sense; everything had been scripted by a breathtakingly benevolent, incomprehensible Intelligence whose work -- my life -- I could only behold with joy.

My sensitivity -- physical, emotional and psychic -- was magnified to the point of the fabled princess who could feel the pea under a mountain of mattresses. Colors were extraordinarily brilliant and my hearing grew so acute than if Charles so much as coughed from another room, I jumped as if it had been a gunshot.

I had outright convulsions, with energy roaring up from the base of my spine and out the top of my head. My world was rife with holy madness. I became a sort of human tuning fork -- mechanical vibrations set me off in a wild way. Once Charles decided to clean some crumbs off the table with the Dustbuster. As soon as he switched it on, I went into a seizure. Energy blasted through my spinal cord and out the top of my head like a geyser. It was both terrible and hilarious. Charles had no idea that my sudden "attack" had anything to do with the vibration of

the vacuum cleaner, and my teeth rattled so hard I could only beg in an incoherent stutter: "St...st...st...STOP!" He finally understood, and as soon as the machine was off, my convulsion ended.

Spectacular lights greeted me, whether my eyes were open or closed. I could feel staggering electricity circulating inside me and I often felt electrical shocks from my own body. (Sometimes when Charles touched me, he got a shock but I didn't feel one.) Intense, at times unbearable heat made me feel like a human furnace. Oddly, this heat was not at all like a fever and I didn't perspire. (This is not so in all cases; some people sweat rivers from Kundalini heat.) I was experiencing elaborate, involuntary bodily movements all the while; they are called kriyas and mudras and are so phenomenal I am devoting Chapter Four to describing them in detail. For several months, I was deluged by mystical experiences. I had visions, heard and inwardly saw guides who instructed and aided me in accommodating the process, and I had vivid clairvoyant dreams.

Throughout all this, I was under barrage of continuously changing physical symptoms, which made me feel -- with not a little gallows humor -- like a hybrid of Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* and Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly*. I was being torn apart and re-created at every level. Nothing about the process was predictable. Every day, I was caught anew by astonishment as something completely unexpected developed.

The Mystery Unravels

At times I feel like a living experiment, an alchemist's vessel in which a marvelous, although sometimes painful, mystery is unfolding. -- Richard Moss

During this same period, a series of synchronicities led me to Kundalini literature that was describing my strange symptoms. By the time I was ready to believe that my Kundalini had risen, I spotted an ad for a spiritual emergence support group in a local alternative newspaper. (This same ad ran for four consecutive weeks. I had never before and have not since seen one like it in that or any other publication.) When I called the listed number, the therapist who was facilitating the group told me that she was also involved in a spontaneous Kundalini process, but her experiences had been less drastic than mine. She put me in touch with the one other person she knew who was undergoing Kundalini awakening -- and it turned out to be someone whose Kundalini symptoms were remarkably similar to mine at the time. The therapist also gave me the new phone number for the Spiritual Emergence Network. (I had tried to call SEN previously, but they had changed location and I had been unable to reach them. The therapist had acquired their new number just days before I contacted her!)

My awakening process has been what the late Swami Muktananda would have called "dynamic." It doesn't hit everyone this strongly. In six months time, I'd been hurled on a roller coaster of physical and emotional shocks. From the grief and terror of thinking my life was coming to an abrupt end, I was thrown into the equally awesome realization that I was in the midst of a monumental spiritual process. My mind ricocheted from fear to relief; from hopelessness to amazement. Wrestling with a tremendous sense of unworthiness, I was simultaneously shaken by how decisively this experience was sealing my fate as a social outcast. (It is one thing to choose -

- or imagine one has choice -- to be a nonconformist. It is another to be given to know and live a reality that few people can conceive possible.)

Although I'd been sensitive all my life, this was psychically expanding me by quantum leaps. Physically, mentally and emotionally, I was being pushed to the limit on a near continual basis. For all its intensity, I knew a Kundalini awakening was considered a great spiritual gift, which led, ultimately, to deep inner healing. Foremost of all my reactions was an almost instant trust in the process. This was (and still is) a potent experience for me. I had never before fully trusted anyone or anything.

Deep into this process, I spent most of my days in prayer, meditation and deference to this new central power in my life. To a friend, I wrote, "My mind is overwhelmed. My body is sometimes in pain, but it seems to be getting stronger and more able to be a clear vehicle for this incredible surging energy. My heart is so full." With the fusion of fear and love the ancients called "awe," I gave myself to Kundalini. I loved Her with the passion moths feel for the flame; with the allegiance drowned sailors feel for the sea. Because I had been told in childhood that I had no voice for singing, I never sing unless I'm so giddy with happiness I can't contain myself. When my children were babies, I sang to them. And during the most spectacular months of my awakening, I sang to Kundalini-Ma.

It is easier to describe the physical symptoms than the complex mental, emotional and spiritual permutations of this process. So much has happened within me: such upheaval, struggle, pain, beauty, soul-searching, and regeneration. Where this will eventually take me, I have no idea. Each day has become more mysterious to me as this unfolds. Even when nothing particularly spectacular or extraordinary occurs, I feel more wonder and faith than ever before. It certainly hasn't been an easy or gentle process, and when the pain is intense, I beg for mercy. But when it lessens, I find myself willing to go deeper, to search further, and to do more of whatever is required of me to complete this work. So much of the untouchable loneliness and fragmentation I've carried with me my entire life is melting away. Before all this began, I'd assumed I was moving downhill, into the latter stages of my life... that I'd done and experienced everything available to me in this lifetime, fearing the rest would be a series of dull reruns. Now everything has been "made new." No wonder this is called the rebirth.

We Are Magical

What was and continues to be as great a marvel to me as my Kundalini odyssey is Charles. He is the most open-minded, steadfast and spiritually attuned human being I have ever known; that he is also my husband is a miracle for which I daily give thanks. Had our roles been reversed and he had been the one on this careening course of illness and phantasmagoric initiation, I don't know if I could have stood by him with one-tenth the faith and fearlessness he has evinced nearly every inch of the way. His trust in Kundalini runs as deep or deeper than my own, a fact that has been sustaining for us both throughout this lengthy journey. Once, during the period when unexpected things were constantly happening, I warned Charles that I felt something weird was about to break loose. Some kind of force was thrusting up from my solar plexus toward my throat. I thought for an instant the "something" would be a scream, and I didn't want to alarm him. The suspense broke as an involuntary sound escaped my lips; to my astonishment, it was a deeply

resonant "Om." As wave upon wave of this force sounded "Om" through my vocal cords, I became a living trumpet played by the gods. Amazed as I was by this, I was doubly moved when Charles responded by voluntarily chanting along with me.

Through every twist and turn of this prodigious journey, he has been at my side. I'm not saying there have been no trying times, or that he's never grown weary. The stress on us both has been enormous. Yet with remarkable resilience, Charles always manages to pull through. I doubt anyone else I have ever known would have been able to endure what he has gone through with me with so much grace, love and courage.

Gopi Krishna credited his beloved wife for keeping him alive through his own arduous decades of Kundalini awakening. Krishnamurti's friends kept loyal vigil with him throughout the tumultuous years of his process. The Spiritual Emergence Network founder Christina Grof has thanked her husband Stan, whose faith in her and in the process itself saw her through her 12-year transformation.

When people stick together through thick and thin under circumstances as challenging as this, their spiritual growth skyrockets far beyond what anyone could hope to attain alone. To us, it's obvious that Charles and I are both apprenticed to Kundalini. I'm just the more direct target of this ineffable process, which is transforming us both.

There is an insidious myth that those who greet Kundalini (or life in general) with open arms and a glad heart do not suffer serious pain or difficulties. Don't believe it. When I understood Kundalini had risen in me, I could not have been more awed if I had opened my door to find the streets filled with angels announcing the Second Coming. Although I have gone through periods of extreme pain and have in many ways had my world turned inside out by the fierce Shakti Goddess, I am grateful that Kundalini has come alive in me. The wonders of this process have renewed my faith not only in the Spirit, but also gives me hope for the human race and for the future of this blue jewel of a planet.

The miraculous is always ready and waiting for us to be willing to move into it. The universe is far more magical and amazing than we have dared to imagine. Which is to say, we are magical and amazing too! That is one thing that kept repeating over and over in my head during the peak of my Kundalini experiences: We have underestimated ourselves so terribly! And we have underestimated the glory of the Universe that interconnects us.

Chapter 4

SPIRIT DANCE

"Thou art the mysterious Electricity of my body, moving the intricate mechanism of flesh, bones, muscles, and nerves. Thy life force is present in my every breath and heartbeat. O Sole Doer in Man and the Universe! may I realize that all power is divine and flows only from Thee."

-- Yogananda

Since my Kundalini became activated, I've been living with energetic manifestations twenty-four hours a day. The most constant of these varied symptoms are the kriyas. Kriya is a Sanskrit word that means "action." In the context of the risen Kundalini, kriyas refers to involuntary movements, which result from increased life force -- pranic energy -- in the body. Those who meditate or do yoga, Chi Gong, or similar practices may also experience kriyas during their practice.

The energetic force behind these spontaneous movements is an awesome thing, particularly in the early stages, before one becomes accustomed to being co-inhabited, so to speak. One quite literally feels an overpowering presence that takes command of the nervous system, unexpectedly flinging up an arm or sending the whole body into paroxysms. While these involuntary movements are often most pronounced when the body is resting or when we are drifting into sleep, kriyas are different from what sleep researchers call a "myoclonic jerk" in which the body jumps and awakens us on the brink of sleep. The myoclonic jerk is usually accompanied by a sudden sensation of falling. (Some psychics say this is a reaction to the astral body separating from the physical in preparation for dream travel.)

I've had people tell me that their meditation or yoga teacher doesn't like the automatic movements their arms and body make during practice. Health instructors and spiritual advisors who lack personal experience with the Kundalini process do not understand that these manifestations are often a very positive sign of inner healing and spiritual progress. While some gurus and spiritual teachers strongly recommend surrendering to kriyas, others, like Jack Kornfield and Yogi Bhanjan (and, oddly, some devotees of Kriya Yoga) advise suppression of these spontaneous movements.

I believe it is extremely important to honor our own development and not allow others who claim authority to tyrannize us. When the Kundalini is very active, it is nigh impossible to meditate and repress the bodily movements that are triggered by inwardly accelerated energies. I found that any attempt to resist my kriyas simply increased the tension and discomfort in my body. Besides, the strongest kriyas often occur during sleep. Short of keeping all night vigils, which I cannot imagine being healthy, I do not know how one could guard against these.

Kundalini's inner force may inexplicably bend and twist the torso into extreme and weird positions. The natural reaction to such a foreign internal take-over is resistance. Trying to fight an invisible, unknown power for never-before-contested rights of sovereignty over our own anatomy can become a terrifying battle. What changes our predicament, from one of being locked into combat with alien forces, to one of a peaceful witnessing of wonders is our surrender

to the apparent whims of this newly assigned central-control operator. We can allow our bodies to sway like palm trees in the blustering winds of Kundalini. Understanding that these non-volitional movements are serving a biological and spiritual purpose does much to release our fear.

What causes kriyas? Most of the literature I've read says that when the prana -- i.e., life-force energy -- is increased in the body, it's crudely analogous to water pressure being increased in a hose. If the pressure is radically increased and the hose is narrow, the force of the water will make the hose whip around furiously. In order for spiritual energy to flow smoothly through our systems, we need to be enlarged and unobstructed. This expansion and clearing takes place on many levels: physically, mentally, psychologically, and emotionally. The activated Kundalini produces kriyas when it comes up against inner blockage. This blockage may be in the form of stored physical or emotional trauma, limiting beliefs and attitudes, or psychic debris from collective toxins, past lives, astral dimensions, etc.

The externally evident kriyas, visible as uncontrolled movements of the body, signify a great inner healing process. It's unnecessary for us to be consciously aware of the exact nature of our blockages. As the Shakti engages these blockages, it works to dissolve them. While this dissolution is occurring, a flurry of previously frozen, unconscious material becomes available to us. This may arise as thoughts, physical sensations, or emotions. At this stage, we often feel physically sick and emotionally unstable. Without warning or apparent provocation, we plunge into fits of rage or chasms of grief or despair. These erratic and overwhelming feelings are simply ancient energies, which were locked within us. As the Shakti empties us of these trapped energies, we temporarily relive them. This also happens on the physical level. Old injuries and illnesses are temporarily re-experienced. Although it can be painful and difficult to tolerate these physical and emotional states, they are not harmful. To the contrary, they are signs of deep, forgotten, festering wounds, which are at last being opened, drained, and fully healed.

However, it must be said that the unconscious contents, which flood awareness when Kundalini is aroused can be dangerous if they are willfully repressed or denied. Charles Breaux warns that when this happens, the spiritual energy "may become trapped or its circulation distorted in the channels of the subtle bodies. Severe physical or psychological imbalances could then occur."

Some of the Kundalini texts refer to inner blockages as "resistance." Unfortunately, this word has been misinterpreted to mean that kriyas occur if one has a resentful or resistant attitude toward the transformational process. Some "experts" insist that those who maintain a positive attitude toward their Kundalini awakening have very few and mild kriyas. From my own case, I feel this to be untrue. As I have already said, since I became aware that I was having a Kundalini awakening, I have accepted this process as a great gift. I can't imagine how I could have been more surrendered to it than I have been.

For me, the kriyas began with a palsy-like shaking motion of my head. At the time, I didn't realize I was having a Kundalini awakening and this uncontrollable movement worried me. I thought it might indicate a serious neurological problem, although the many medical tests I'd had in the previous weeks revealed no abnormalities. I was also experiencing little muscle twitches all over my body. These were painless but worrisome to me. They occurred sporadically

throughout the day and night. Shortly after this development, the twitches progressed to outright muscle contractions. These were deep and achy. For a while, they occurred randomly, mostly in my arms and legs. Then they took over my entire body. As this progressed, I was pulled into an ever intensifying state of exalted consciousness.

Next came the most wild of the kriyas. They continued day and night, but were most vigorous when I was lying down at rest. I hardly slept at all during this period. My body would jerk around in radical, spasmodic movements. These often involved very specific muscle groups, such as those in my feet, hands, stomach, back and so forth. The kriyas would involve only one of these bodily areas at a time. It felt as if I were being intensely rolled by an invisible force. The soles of my feet would tighten and my toes clenched and relaxed over and over. Then the energy would move into my ankles, flexing my feet up and down for long periods of time. Later it would reach into my calves, rigorously kneading and contracting the muscles there.

After some days of this, the "calisthenics" began. The joints of my body were more pinpointed in this phase. My limbs would begin to twist and turn in wrenching, repetitive movements that at times were so violent it felt as if the joints were being dislocated. As these kriyas continued, my body seemed to be slowly loosening up and each phase was less painful than the preceding one. I entered a period of "piano exercises" in which my fingers would one at a time bend and straighten, very rapidly and rhythmically. Sometimes each finger would flex a set number of times -- one-two-three-four -- before the next would begin to move. These movements were far more rapid and agile than anything I could have done intentionally.

The movements progressed into my limbs: my arms would fly up and down in a fast and rhythmic motion. My legs would kick up and down in the same way. These movements were hard and martial, as if I were practicing military marching while lying in bed. With my body going through these gymnastics, I felt like a marionette whose strings were being controlled by a hyperactive child. By this time, the only discomfort I was feeling from the kriyas was a moderate electric shock that preceded each physical movement. (Eventually, the shocks came less often, though I could usually feel a telltale tension in my body -- similar to the way it feels before a sneeze -- when a Kriya was coming.) Also, the long bouts of kicking and arm flailing (which would sometimes continue unabated for hours) were tiring to my body and made my muscles ache.

When the muscles of my back became involved, I would be abruptly arched forward and back, so that I bounced on the bed. If I was standing or sitting, these movements were like greatly exaggerated hiccups. No part of my anatomy was spared in these strange exercises. My head would go through its own workout, twisting sharply left and right, or vigorously nodding forward and back. These movements were so swift they made me dizzy, and so powerful that I feared my neck would snap. My facial muscles moved also. My jaw would "lock" or slide back and forth; my nose would wriggle like a rabbit's; my face would contort into weird expressions. My scalp muscles moved too. My forehead would crease up, then stretch so tight I thought the skin would rip.

The most frightening of all these movements were in my eyes. They would roll around furiously, feeling as if they would burst out of their sockets. Sometimes the movements were rapidly back

and forth. Or my eyes would rotate cross-eyed, or up into my head so I couldn't see. (Much later I learned that the cross-eyed gaze is one of the most highly regarded practices in yoga, called the shambhavi mudra. It is considered to be a powerful technique for awakening the ajna chakra -- the "third eye.")

These severe eye movements were painful. I could feel and hear tissue popping and tearing around my eyeballs when these sessions occurred. I had read that such violent eye kriyas sometimes caused temporary blindness. This was less than reassuring, although at the time, I was so awed by what was transpiring within me that I was not unduly concerned. Luckily, I suffered no visual damage during this period.

After about two months of this, the mudras began. Mudras are sacred bodily movements -- usually of the hands, fingers or arms -- described in some yogic texts. They can be seen in classic statues of Buddhist and Hindu deities. They are also the basis for hand movements in ancient dances such as temple dancing, belly dancing and the hula. Author Walt Anderson has accurately noted that "A mudra is understood to be functionally related to a certain state of consciousness; the cause-and-effect sequence is not clear, so it would not be exactly right to say that it either expresses a state or creates it; it is a sign that that state exists." During the period of her spontaneous visions, while she apparently had no concept of mudras, Janet Adler said she frequently experienced such finger movements: "They are very specific, each finger placed in exact relationship to the other fingers. Sometimes both hands move identically in this regard."

For me, the mudras began with significant finger movements. My thumb would be drawn flat across the palm of my hand, or extended outward at a right angle from my palm. Each finger would be pressed and held down at certain points on the palm. I would often feel corresponding sensations in my body when these points were pressed. Whenever the thumb pushed at the base of the ring finger, there was a simultaneous, ecstatic little ripple in my chest. I called these sensations "heart orgasms" and was sure this mudra had a positive effect on the heart chakra. (The Egyptians apparently had this experience also; they believed that a love pathway traced directly from the fourth finger to the heart.)

The most frequent mudra I experienced was my thumb and index finger of the same hand being drawn together as if by a powerful magnet. I would actually feel a streaming electrical current flowing through this mysterious circuit. It seemed to be regulating and balancing the energy in my body. This specific mudra often would be held for a long time, once over sixteen hours straight. Although I didn't know it then, I have since learned that the index finger is symbolic of the individual soul (jivatma) and the thumb represents the Supreme Being (paramatma). Hiroshi Motoyama, a scientist, religious scholar, and luminary in both the Shinto and Yoga traditions says that this position of the finger and thumb "symbolizes the ultimate goal of yoga -- the union of the individual soul and the Supreme Consciousness."

I learned quickly to be very protective of these joined together thumb/finger mudras, which would often occur in both hands at once. If I accidentally jarred them apart -- usually when turning in my sleep or trying to use my hands to do something -- I would immediately go into a seizure and shriek with a sensation of being electrocuted. Deliberately playing around with the finger mudras proved not such a hot idea either. When I experimented with this, I found that

when I tried to imitate the mudras, there were none of the sensations I felt when they came automatically. Worse, sometimes I would get stabbing little electric shocks when I tried to put my fingers in these positions myself.

Then came the most astonishing spontaneous movements yet. One afternoon, the kriyas began to come on hard and strong. I had by this time learned it was better to relax into these movements and let them take me over. Otherwise, if I stiffened or resisted, I felt pain in my body. I had also become accustomed to the rhythmic jerking of my arms, which sometimes caused them to swing to and fro like pendulums or flap like bird's wings. But now something different was happening. The arm movements were becoming more sinuous and complex. As these arm motions became more fast and furious, I went to a full-length mirror to witness what was happening. All at once I had the most eerie feeling, as if my body was remembering something. My hips, knees and legs had begun to sway and undulate as the intricate arm motions continued. These arm movements were dynamic, but unmistakably graceful and choreographed. I stared at the mirror in awe. My body was performing some kind of exotic dance, which went on for five minutes or so. Then my arms came forward and my hands met, palms pressed together in a prayer-like pose, and drew up to the center of my chest. A force pulled me over into a bow and held me there an instant. Without warning, my knees buckled, and I found myself kneeling prostrate on the floor. The thought hit me: "I'm worshipping something." But worshipping what? Then I knew: I had just performed a sacred temple dance.

This was the first time that I seriously questioned my sanity. I wondered, with alarm, if I had become schizophrenic. This suspicion was short-lived. My rational mind laughed: schizophrenics don't suddenly break out into beautiful, exotic dances and then realize they've gone crazy!

It took me another four years to fully realize who I had been dancing for: the Great Mother/Goddess! The last part of my sacred dance, where I prostrated myself on the floor, is misunderstood in religious practice to be only an act of abasement before the magnificence of God. My body/soul understood it to be much more than this. As the Jungian analyst Marion Woodman has so well expressed it, "prayer is putting your head on the earth, bringing your head down to the ground," in the realization that one can "never surrender to the beauty of the translucent light without the grounding of the body." Bowing prostrate is simultaneously acknowledging one's smallness in the presence of God and embracing in adoration the firmament of the Goddess.

The temple dancing continued to occur for the rest of that day, and by evening there were also episodes of what seemed to be some sort of tribal dancing as well. This went on for hours, even though I was in a state of physical exhaustion. Although the temple dancing recurred daily for several weeks after this, it never again pushed me to my physical and mental limits.

I later learned of other women who began spontaneous dancing during their awakening. One referred to these sinuous movements as her "snake dancing." Korean mudang (shaman) Hi-ah Park told of her shamanic illness in which her body "started uncontrollably swaying in a circular motion." Another time, she "danced serpentine, slow movements, as if lifted by an invisible force. The dance vibrated with dynamic fire, evoking pathos, the spiraling energy."

Psychology Professor Bradford Keeney, whose shamanic calling began with a spontaneous Kundalini awakening at the age of nineteen, had a similar experience while in Africa. While participating in a healing ceremony with the Kalahari bushmen tribe, he says that his legs began wildly trembling and vibrating: "They were in synch with the polyrhythms and sounds of the dance... And then it happened: without any effort, the dance danced me. I cannot fully explain this, but the power got into my hips, energizing my feet and legs to have a life of their own."

Cut off from the Spirit, dancing is either recreational or representational -- something done for entertainment or to convey a story of some sort. But initially dance arose spontaneously when the Spirit and body were unified as one living flame. The exultant life force animates the body just as it beats the drum of the heart. To be alive is its own majesty, which needs no further embellishment.

Clearly, there is something about certain levels of consciousness that invoke the whole of the body; we are danced by primal energies. Havelock Ellis, the English social scientist and writer, has commented that "You cannot find a single ancient mystery in which there is no dancing..."

It was during this time that I also began being thrust into spontaneous asanas (yoga positions). These would happen at night, sometimes in my sleep, or when I meditated. I would awaken to find my body contorted in unusual postures. When sitting in meditation, my body would suddenly be thrown forward into a cobra pose, or other unexpected positions. This is not uncommon for those experiencing the awakened Kundalini. Yoga, like mudras and pranayama (altered breathing patterns) was originally shamanistic. In other words, they were spirit-taught; they arose spontaneously through the body when the psyche was in a certain state of heightened consciousness. Eventually, whenever I arose in the morning, my body would be pushed into a series of exercises, which would go on for about an hour. These were everything from toe touches to hatha yoga postures to T'ai Chi movements. I realized that I was becoming more flexible than I had been in over fifteen years.

By the time the kriyas had been going for a year, they began to be enjoyable. In and of themselves, the spontaneous jerking movements caused neither pleasure nor pain. But they would be immediately followed by waves of sensual energy surging through my body. For me, the kriyas intensify when Kundalini is amplifying the energy in my body. Every night when I first lie down, streams of energy flash up from my feet into my spine. These energy rushes start my body jerking and my legs kicking and thrashing, and sometimes make me shake all over. Depending on how strong the energy is, and how much blockage it comes up against, these nocturnal kriyas can last anywhere from a few minutes to half the night. Sometimes they go on so long and so vigorously that sleep is impossible. Other times, they subside, then became active again and awaken me from sleep.

I still have kriyas in the day as well, but never as racking or as relentless as they were in the early stages of my Kundalini awakening. Now, the daytime kriyas are generally concentrated in areas of my body where the energy is working through blockages. For instance, for many months, the Kundalini was most active in my chest and neck area. I had all kinds of physical symptoms in this part of my body: coughing, throat problems, chest congestion, deep muscle pain in my neck and upper back, sharp, shooting pains in my chest, arthritic stiffness and soreness in my cervical

spine area, and much more. During this same time, my shoulders would automatically hunch up and down for long periods of the day. These shoulder kriyas released bursts of soothing energy that circulated the afflicted area.

While the kriyas may involve any part of my body, the mudras occur primarily in my hands, fingers and arms. The kriyas are spasmodic and jerky, but the mudras are always very graceful and precise. The mudras still occur for me, but they've gone through various permutations. Now, I rarely have the finger mudras, though the arm and hand movements that began with the temple dancing continue. In contrast to the finger mudras, which were generally held in certain positions for long periods of time, the arm and hand mudras are usually rapid and continuously in motion. This may be part of what is being represented in the Hindu statues of many-armed deities.

While I hesitate to classify the mudras by category, they do seem to serve several purposes. At points, I was given to understand the meanings of specific mudras. For example, when both arms extend outward with palms parallel to each other and facing upwards, non-attachment is symbolized. Specifically, I was inwardly told that this mudra means: "I come to God empty-handed."

Another mudra is one or both hands suddenly flying up over my head, with hands open and stretched back, palms upward. This would occur frequently during the day, and always when I sat down for a meal. Another woman had this same spontaneous mudra occur when she went to a restaurant with her friends. The friends, embarrassed, told her to stop it. She felt humiliated and "out of control", with no idea why her arms had shot up like this. When I told her that I'd experienced the same thing, she felt relieved. And she was deeply touched when I told her that this mudra signifies gratitude. "Your body was saying grace," I assured her. Specifically, this mudra means: "Everything belongs to God." (A year later, I found this mudra described by feng shui consultant Sarah Rossbach as central to a meditation ritual called "The Great Sunshine Buddha.")

Other mudras have a distinct effect on my system. I can physically feel these movements smoothing and stabilizing my energy. These are the aura-balancing mudras. The arms and hands move in involuntary, graceful and often rapid configurations. The chakra areas are particularly influenced by these mudras. Conversely, whenever one of my chakras is unbalanced, my hands will fly into motion to redistribute the energy there. This happens often when I am in the presence of someone (even through telephone contact) in mental or emotional distress. People who are angry or worried (even if they are not outwardly expressing these feelings) generally have third chakra (solar plexus) disturbances. If I am with them, my own third chakra resonates discord. This is felt as "butterflies" in the stomach, or as nausea and sharp pains in this area, or even as a sudden sensation of being punched in the stomach. In the presence of someone sad, a heavy feeling will weigh on my chest. This automatically triggers the mudras. There is a mudra, which seems specific to calming the heart chakra. One hand, held vertically, fingers pressed together, is brought up and held with the thumb side against the center of the chest.

There have been occasions when my hands would move spontaneously to cleanse my aura. My fingers would appear to be grasping a length of something and extricating it from my body. From my previous study of metaphysics, I knew the "something" was psychic cords. Sometimes these

would be short, and quickly removed from my body as if my fingers were plucking out porcupine quills. Other cords were so long my hands would turn round and round as though twirling a long strand of spaghetti. Though I could always feel a sensation when this happened, rarely was it unpleasant. Once, a cord was pulled from inside my mouth that seemed to be rooted somewhere in my abdomen. I gagged several times during this operation.

A woman with a risen Kundalini, who knew nothing about auras or mudras, told me that at times her hands would seem to be gathering something up from around her body and then forcefully throwing something away. This throwing away motion is familiar to body workers and psychics, who are taught this as a means of eliminating foreign and undesirable energies. My own hands would also do these expelling motions on occasion.

My spontaneous aura-cleansing movements ceased after several months. Five years later, I began having episodes or extreme heaviness in my body as I had at the beginning of my awakening. At first I thought this might be the onset of chronic fatigue-like muscle weakness that many people report during their process. This is sometimes attributed to adrenal exhaustion. Yet in my case it was caused by an overload of Shakti due to the energies I was absorbing from the many other people I was interacting with who also had active Kundalini.

I found that ordinary exercising worsened my condition (as is true with chronic fatigue victims). But when I allowed my arms to move slightly, so that Kundalini could take over and guide them, the autonomous aura cleansing motions returned, clearing my subtle body of energy excesses. Immediately thereafter, the heaviness and weakness (some experience this as becoming very slow in their movements) dissipated.

In the beginning, I was able to do some healings on others by working on their auras. I say that "I" was able to do this, but in truth, I have no idea what I did. It was Kundalini moving through me and automatically moving my hands and arms that brought about these healings. Likewise, I have no formula for detecting cords or doing anything else to balance my own or anyone else's energy. How Kundalini directs my hands to do this remains a great mystery to me.

Many people with awakened Kundalini discover they can do healings for others and sometimes they feel almost compelled to do so. While at a party, a woman began telling an elderly gentleman she had just met about some of her Kundalini experiences. He immediately suggested that she lay her hands on him to try to heal him. She demurred, protesting that she was unqualified and had no business attempting healing, but the man was so persistent she finally agreed to give it a brief try. Although he had not mentioned the nature of his illness, she felt drawn to place her hands on his neck. No sooner had she touched him than a terrific bolt of electricity literally blasted from her fingertips, knocking the man out of his chair and startling everyone else in the house with the explosive noise.

Aghast, she hurriedly helped her "patient" up from the floor. Not only was he unhurt; to her amazement, he was very eager for her to do it again. It was at this time that he informed her of his advanced cancer of the throat. I do not know if she heard from him again, or if the explosive-energy healed him of his cancer. I do know of other cases where rapid healing was witnessed. One man was inexorably drawn to approach and aggressively heal a stranger who was blind.

Within minutes, she regained her sight! Less dramatic healings of cuts, bruises, sprains, nosebleeds and such have also been reported by people whose healing abilities became evident during their Kundalini process.

As for my mudras and kriyas, Charles and I have become so accustomed to them that we think nothing of them. But other people, having no exposure to or understanding of these phenomena, are very uncomfortable around anyone manifesting kriyas or mudras. The kriyas resemble neurological problems, and are less likely to be criticized than the mudras. People have trouble believing that these are spontaneous, uncontrolled movements since they are so graceful and seemingly deliberate. For this reason, my ongoing kriyas and mudras make me feel very self-conscious in public or in the presence of others.

While spontaneous dancing and mudras may seem a peculiar embodiment of Spirit, it is this process of not-doing -- of being "lived" by a Greater Presence -- that is essential in many traditions and mystery schools. Learning to be a hollow vessel, to be a willing and surrendered vehicle of supernal power, is a central facet of Zen practice, particularly in Zen archery and painting. When the Kundalini is extremely active, the experience of self-as-vessel becomes an immediate experiential reality.

While not everyone undergoing a Kundalini awakening experiences kriyas or mudras, most do, to some extent. Even mild kriyas and mudras can be frightening when we do not realize that they are a natural response to greatly heightened energies in the body. Psychics or other healers who are unfamiliar with Kundalini may interpret these energies in a negative and sometimes terrifying way -- for instance, suggesting that some evil force is causing these uncontrollable body movements. Doctors who are ignorant of these phenomena may regard it in pathological terms, as signs of neurological dysfunction or somatized psychological disturbance. Addictive drugs, such as the benzodiazepines (Valium, Xanax, Halcion, Ativan, Restoril, Serax, Klonopin, etc.) are sometimes prescribed. While these medications may be needed during the most physically painful part of the process, withdrawal after extended use will dramatically intensify the kriyas.

Those who haven't had personal experience with mudras and kriyas may find my case fantastic and stretching credibility, but I haven't written this to thrill my readers with a strange tale of phantasmagoric adventure. I'm telling my story for the sake of others who are experiencing similar things, and who may find reassurance in learning that these manifestations are not a sign of insanity, brain damage or demonic possession. They are simply part of an amazing and mysterious transformation of consciousness.

Chapter 5

THE LOTUSES IN BLOOM

"I receive! I have been received! I hear the flowers drinking in their light." -- Theodore Roethke

Increased psychic sensitivity is a common feature of spiritual emergence. This expansion in awareness may occur gradually or it may dramatically mushroom out of the blue. For those who have little psychic experience, extrasensory perception might sound like a terrific and inviting magical power. But when we are suddenly and unexpectedly psychically sensitized, it can produce a bewildering information overload. The loss of personal boundaries that occurs with psychic opening can be formidable. When the overload causes confusion and impedes our ability to carry out the ordinary tasks of daily life, it can become a real problem.

All extrasensory abilities, including the renowned "siddhis", or spiritual powers of the yogis, are the result of awakened Chakras. The Chakras and Kundalini are really inseparable; when the Kundalini rises, the Chakras begin to open up. If the Kundalini has not been activated, it is not possible to awaken all the Chakras.

Spiritual practices such as meditation and certain metaphysical techniques can begin to awaken the Chakras, but they can also be pierced through sharp physical blows to these areas. Natural clairvoyants and psychics frequently have childhood histories of such injuries, particularly to the head or the spine. Strong electrical shocks to the body also powerfully stimulate the Chakras. It would seem that some of us have undergone spiritually purposeful trauma, when forces in the environment have acted as the Zen master with the proverbial stick, literally clobbering us into awakening.

The Chakras

"Kundalini and the Chakras are the means through which the soul-powers function within the physical, the astral, the etheric, the mental and the spiritual worlds." -- Ann Ree Colton

I awoke in the middle of the night to see beautiful, radiantly colored mandalas spinning over my Chakras. Months later, talking to a friend who was five years into the throes of a Kundalini awakening, she remarked that she was seeing "colored pinwheels" over her body. Another woman whose heart chakra was opening told me she felt something rotating in her chest. Irina Tweedie said she heard her heart chakra whirling "round and round at a terrific speed" during her own spiritual transformation. According to Charles Breaux, the Chakras appear to clairvoyants "as whirlpools of energy funneling into the etheric body."

Chakra (which means, literally, "wheel") is the Sanskrit word for an energy center in the subtle body. These energy vortexes are related to the endocrine glands and major nerve ganglia in the physical body. From my direct experiences combined with my research on this, I understand the Chakras to be interdimensional and complex gates to perception. When energetically mature, these gates allow the mind access to expansive knowledge and cosmic/mystical information.

In yogic lore, there are seven major and 43 minor Chakras in the human system. All the Chakras are said to revolve, but the rate at which they spin is proportionate to the amount of energy in the system. Teachers like Gabriel Cousens and Yogananda believe that what the early Christians called the "seven churches" were, in fact, the Chakras, as were the "seven seals on the back of the Book of Life" referred to in the Bible. (Quite a few mystics from various traditions believe that the entire Biblical account of Revelations is describing St. John's Kundalini awakening.)

Ancient cultures were aware of these etheric energy centers in the body, although they differ in the number which they believed were of most importance. The Hopi Indian tradition designates five energy centers in the body; the Huichol Indians of Mexico speak of energy fields, which radiate from various areas of the body; and the Cuna Indians believe that eight "spirits" inhabit the body in the chakra locations.

In Zen, as well as in most martial arts, the only chakra emphasized is the second, which the Japanese call the hara. In Vajrayana Buddhism and Sufi teachings, the third, fourth and six Chakras are considered most significant. From this, says Walt Anderson, comes "the Islamic gesture of touching the hand to the head, heart, and stomach and then extending it outward."

The Chakras rarely just spring open and stay that way. As with the Kundalini, the awakening or "piercing" of the Chakras is a long developmental process, accompanied by myriad bodily sensations and changes in consciousness. "Each chakra represents an obstacle that must be surmounted," says Darrel Irving: "As the Chakras are penetrated by the Kundalini energy, transfiguration occurs, for each chakra is governed by its own dynamic, where various emotions, both pleasurable and unpleasurable, are encountered, where illusions are stripped of their facades, where emotional knots are untied, and where understanding is increased."

At different stages of our transformation, we may feel particular Chakras being "worked upon" or spontaneously opening. Intense heat may be felt in any of the Chakras when they are beginning to awaken; there may also be tenderness, swelling, or unusual sensations in these areas. Sometimes more than one chakra is being cleared during the same period. (Often, the 6th and 3rd, and the 7th and 4th, open as pairs.)

The movement of the Kundalini isn't like baseball; it doesn't have to touch all the bases to reach home with a fireworks explosion. The Chakras may awaken in any order. A man once questioned me about this, "I don't understand how a higher chakra could open before the lower Chakras are pierced. Does the Kundalini skip around them in some way?"

In yogic texts and Western exercises for awakening or cleansing the Chakras, they are generally dealt with in an ascending order, from the base up to the crown. When Kundalini opens the Chakras naturally, she is rarely this methodical. I cannot explain how this is done any more than physicists can tell us how it is that light manifests as both particle and wave. The Spirit operates mysteriously.

My Chakras began to undergo dramatic changes during the intense early phase of my process, when I was in an altered state for several months. Sometimes my hand would automatically touch my 4th chakra (at the center of my chest), then transfer the energy to my 3rd and 6th

Chakras. I would feel a powerful zap of energy in my forehead (6th) or solar plexus (3rd) when this happened. In partial awakenings, only the lower Chakras may be affected; the Kundalini may then subside. In complete awakenings, the upper four Chakras are also involved.

The Hindu literature designates the seven major Chakras as:

(1) Muladhara (1st or root chakra), located at the base of the spine (this is the earth element)

(2) Svadhishthana (2nd chakra), located in the lower abdomen (this is the water element)

(3) Manipura (3rd chakra), located at the solar plexus (this is the fire element)

(4) Anahata (4th or heart chakra), located at the center of the chest (this is the air element)

(5) Vishuddha (5th or throat chakra), located at the base of the throat (this is the ether or subtle energy element)

(6) Ajna (6th or Third Eye chakra), located in the center of the forehead at the pineal gland (this is the level of mind) (7) Sahasrara (7th or crown chakra), located at the top of the skull (this is the meeting place of manifest/yin and formless/yang divine forces)

Each chakra governs a particular level of consciousness. Darrel Irving suggests the analogy of "the chakra at the base of the spine as an electric generator and the other Chakras as light bulbs varying in wattage from 40 watts at the bottom to 1000 watts at the top." When "the switch is thrown" through the arousal of Kundalini, "electricity flows from the generator to one or more of the bulbs, or Chakras, lighting them."

The 1st through 3rd Chakras regulate awareness that is essential to ordinary functioning in the mundane world. Above the 3rd, the Chakras open us to increasingly rarefied states of being and extrasensory perception. This is sometimes misconstrued to mean that these lower Chakras are less valuable than the upper ones. This is like declaring our legs to be less important than our eyes. Different consciousness levels serve different functions, but as Christiane Northrup has stated, none are extraneous to our well-being: "We cannot hope to improve our health or the circumstances of our lives if we think of our body's lower centers as 'less worthy' or 'beneath our dignity.' "

The distinction of upper and lower relate not so much to hierarchy and value as they do to density and vibrational rates, and to broader or narrower ranges of perception. The many teachings about the Chakras differentiate between active and awakened Chakras. Active Chakras are those in which energy regularly or habitually congregates. Everyone has activity in their Chakras, and each individual characteristically "carries" more energy in certain Chakras than others. A very sensually oriented, hedonistic type would have a strongly active 2nd chakra, while a highly ambitious, competitive personality would be very active in the 3rd chakra. Intellectuals have strongly activated 6th Chakras.

Fundamentally, the consciousness levels of the seven Chakras are as follows:

1st chakra: NEEDS Physical survival -- concerned with finding food, shelter, safety, etc.

This is the level of bodily consciousness. It involves all our issues of physical and material security.

When the 1st, or root chakra, is in the process of awakening, there may be strange sensations at the base of the spine. Itching, tingling, or much stronger vibrations, including thumping, may be felt in the tailbone. When the 1st chakra opens, Shakti (perceived as "fire," light or momentous energy) may shoot up the spine in a spectacular fashion. This may cause a great deal of pain in the spine, or intense, orgasmic sensations in the entire body.

2nd chakra: DESIRES Seeking pleasure and avoidance of pain

Sexuality in its instinctual sense is located at this level. This is also the level of emotions. All energy exchanges in the form of relationships, social interactions and financial concerns affect this chakra area.

The 2nd chakra awakening may produce powerful sexual feelings. Great surges of negative emotion, such as hatred, possessiveness or envy, may be triggered at this level. Mystical identification with wild animals (wolves, bears, lions, etc.), may occur when this chakra is pierced. When my 2nd chakra was pierced, I had spontaneous orgasms, which was a pleasant surprise. I also had a brief episode in which I felt that I was taking on the instincts and physical gestalt of a huge tiger. This was an overwhelming and very frightening experience.

3rd chakra: POWER Personal power -- ego-strength, assertiveness, self vs. other

This is the level of the will. It is the center for personal choice and the "gut-instinct" kind of intuition that helps us appraise daily life situations. When the 3rd chakra at the solar plexus opens, there can be tremendous emotional upheaval. Lots of painful unconscious material can erupt. Vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, nausea and other digestive troubles can accompany this opening. Telepathy, clairvoyance, clairsentience and awareness of astral entities may emerge with an awakened 3rd chakra. The solar plexus is a sort of radar system, which registers whatever is occurring on the mental, emotional and physical planes, both internally and externally. The newly awakened 3rd chakra usually makes us emotionally and psychically hypersensitive. As Arundale says, one can become "a kind of sensitive plate upon which, for example, people in the outer world imprint themselves," such that one can know in a flash "their natures." There were periods in my awakening when I could read into other people's souls; I could sense their darkest secrets and deepest pain without them saying a word.

4th chakra: UNION Relationships; shared experience; cherishing that beyond the self

This is the level of compassion. When the 4th or heart chakra is being awakened, there may be crushing pressures felt in the chest. I felt as if an elephant were sitting on my chest, and had the typical breathing difficulties during this period. All kinds of discomfort can riddle this area. The milder disturbances may take the form of fleeting, shooting pains; muscle tensions or the feeling

of having wrenched a muscle in the front or back of the chest; dull aching; chest congestion; stabbing pains; fluttering or vibrating sensations; heart palpitations; irregular or rapid heartbeat and so forth. There can also be more severe pain: a feeling of being impaled by a stake through the center of the chest; a sense of the heart area being ripped open; or even symptoms that convincingly mimic a heart attack.

Often there is heat focused in this area when the chakra is awakening. This may feel like a warm, glowing sensation or blazing incandescence. After my heart chakra awakened, whenever I was in the presence of anyone who felt sad, I would feel a dark weight on my chest. And when I was with anyone who was directing love toward me, my chest would become very warm. This was a poignant instinctual confirmation. The actor Alan Arkin, whose guru initiated his Kundalini awakening, noticed this same heat in his chest when reading inspirational literature and said that this sensation proved an accurate barometer for knowing that "some kind of spiritual activity was taking place" when he first entered an unfamiliar bookstore or restaurant.

As the heart awakens, profound emotional changes frequently occur. The heart seems to both literally and figuratively break, releasing torrents of sadness and grief. For about six months prior to my acute "illness," I was having periodic bouts of labored breathing (my chest felt very constricted). During this same period, I was overcome with intense compassion for all the people I knew. I would be easily moved to tears upon hearing of any adversity in my friends' lives. This was not maudlin pity, but a deep sadness at the spiritual opaqueness of the world. Everyone evoked sweet-sad, deeply affectionate and reverent feelings in me; I perceived them all as beacons of innocence and beauty.

In many spiritual traditions, it's considered the greatest blessing when the heart chakra awakens. Many regard this the most important energy center of the human psyche. When the heart chakra is wide open, the suffering of all living beings can be acutely felt. At this stage, people may find that they cannot eat meat or even pick a flower, so exquisite is their awareness of the suffering of other living things. Those, whose heart chakra has awakened, generally cannot tolerate displays of violence or willful or uncaring cruelty. This aversion can arise suddenly and dramatically; people become ill, burst out sobbing, faint or shake uncontrollably in reaction to scenes of violence. This occurs even when the violence is remote or fictitious, as in TV programs and movies.

The heart chakra is also a well of joy. When it is awakened, deep feelings of reverence, gratitude, and bliss may arise. We may be overcome by a momentary flood of love, or may walk around in a state of continuous loving ecstasy that lasts for weeks or months on end. A sense of the incredible beauty of all creation can be staggering, and tears of rapture can flow as easily and uncontrollably as tears of sorrow. Realization of unity with the divine and/or with all existing beings is dramatic at this time. Tremendous feelings of appreciation and compassion arise.

It is not so easy to blossom with such radiance and sensitivity in our hardened society where unfeeling response and robotic behavior is considered normal, while heartfulness is despised for being too emotional and weak. Men have an especially hard time of it when this chakra opens and they shed tears in public. Yet imagine what a paradise this world could become if we were all awash with love and unable to endure brutality toward any sentient creatures. At this 4th

chakra level of consciousness, the Golden Rule becomes a living truth; cheating, exploiting, excluding or otherwise inflicting harm on another is simply unbearable.

There are many psychic gifts, which arrive in the wake of heart awakening. Psychokinesis -- the ability to move or otherwise effect objects from a distance -- is related to a very active or awakened heart chakra. The power to do psychic or spiritual healing is also a sign that the heart chakra is opening. Some time after my heart chakra awakened, I was sitting on our back porch when I heard a terrible commotion break out between a group of people in a house down the street. There was loud swearing and screaming and sounds of things being violently thrown about. I wished so much that there was something I could do to send some peace to this family. The instant I had this thought, I saw a triangular ray of purple light extend from my heart chakra and zoom out in the direction of my combative neighbors. Almost as suddenly, all the yelling stopped.

I was astonished, deeply moved, but simultaneously filled with self-reproach. What right did I have to psychically interfere with other people's lives? No sooner had I formed this thought than the angry shouting and screaming resumed full force. Then a voice in my mind said: "Anything done in love is blessed." I took this as permission to send calming energies to my neighbors, which I again did. This time, there was one final slam of a door, then silence.

I repeated this peace-sending experiment several other times in other situations, a part of me still had trouble believing I could help people in such a simple, effortless way. Each time bore the same remarkable results -- instant tranquility.

In my own experience, and that of others who have spoken to me about this, the heart doesn't remain in this heightened condition for the duration of the transformational process. Rather, it seems to move through cycles of recognizable peaks and plateaus. To those who have experienced the super-sensitivity of the wide-open heart, these plateaus may seem regressive. Sri Chinmoy, a spiritual leader and prolific writer of spiritually oriented books, compares the Chakras to windows which may open for a while, then shut down. "Sometimes," he says, "[the heart] opens for a few seconds, a few minutes, or a few days; then it may close again."

Although the Chakras may open suddenly, they generally take a long time to be fully activated. This gradual process allows us to acclimate to these extraordinary energies. What appears to be periods of relapse or regression are more likely periods of refinement and harmonizing. As powerful and "saintly" as the newly awakened heart consciousness can be, it is simply too overwhelming for most of us to sustain this heightened state indefinitely. We need to integrate these experiences, and to be able to move from them back into our ordinary human concerns again. The transformative process is not merely an elevator that delivers us to a higher level of awareness. Evolution is a continuum, though we rarely progress in a linear fashion. Even if we seem to be at a standstill or moving backwards, in actuality, it's a long, intricate process of expansion and balance.

5th chakra: EXPRESSION Inspiration, self-expression through communication.

This is the level of creativity. Through a healthily functioning 5th chakra, we are able to voice our true thoughts and feelings. The throat chakra often takes a long time to open. I suspect this is because most of us have had our voices stifled for most of our lives, being forbidden to speak (or even know) our own truths.

Sensations of strangulation, constriction or tightness around the neck and throat may occur, as well as inexplicable gagging and compulsive swallowing. During Irina Tweedie's throat chakra opening, she says that "I constantly kept touching my throat, feeling a kind of tightness as if I had a high collar." Jack Kornfield mentions that "At the throat there can be tension and coughing; I have seen people who sat and swallowed for days in a row." There may be internal pressure, which feels as if a tumorous growth is developing in the throat. When my 5th chakra was awakening, I could not swallow anything but liquids for months, and I lost 35 pounds.

An awakened 5th chakra can produce spontaneous vocalizations. These may be unusual sounds, singing, or words (sometimes in unrecognized languages) which do not seem to be coming from oneself. (This may be one of the reasons why the Hindu Rig Veda sometimes addresses Kundalini as "Vak" -- the Goddess of speech, although I know there are deeper esoteric meanings to this.) One may also begin to hear inner voices, or be able to hear other people's thoughts.

Other people's voices may be too stimulating when our own throat chakra is highly active. People find it difficult to tolerate the focused vocal energy of telephone conversation during these times. I found I could not listen to music that included singing or even the beautiful vocalizations of Gregorian chant.

There may be a sensation of a hole in the throat (or in the forehead or crown of the head) when the upper Chakras open; air or wind may be felt passing through the hole.

6th chakra: REALIZATION Abstract thought -- intellectual focus

This is the level of knowledge. When the third eye or 6th chakra is awakening, enormous pressures are felt in the head, particularly around the eyes and in the forehead area. These may cause mild, fleeting or persistent and painful headaches. There may be twitching and vibrating felt between the brows. The eyes may roll up into the head or go cross-eyed. (I often awoke at night to find my eyes in this position, even with my eyelids closed.) There may be dazzling internal visions; sometimes a huge single eye is seen staring out.

When the 6th chakra is pierced, one gains contact with spiritual guides, deities and one's guardian angel or guru. One may also gain access to the Akashic records, and be able to "see" one's own and others' past and future lives.

"When the brow Chakra is going strongly, sometimes one feels the head spinning and there can be a dull pain in the bone above the nose and when one presses there it is very tender, and something goes through the nose which makes you sniff," says Irina Tweedie. When this chakra opens, she remarks that "the world seems to change. There is great happiness and great peace."

Jungian analyst Sallie Nichols has noted: "Statues of the Buddha always bear some sign on the forehead. It is the sign of awakened consciousness, the symbol of the twice-born." The use of the bindu -- the dot on the forehead -- in Hindu tradition is to honor the importance of this chakra. A distinctly visible circular indentation sometimes forms in the center of the forehead of saints and gurus (such as can be seen in certain photographs of the late Neem Karoli Baba). Some individuals with awakened Kundalini have told me that they have developed a discoloration or slight indentation of the skin at the level of the third eye.

7th chakra: ASCENSION Reverence -- spiritual focus

This is the consciousness of the divine. When the crown chakra opens there are tingling or crawling sensations, vibrations, painful pressures or coursing energies felt at the top of the head. For some, the skull may feel sore. In my own experience and that of some others I have spoken with, the cranial bones actually start to separate and "float" beneath the skin. According to Arundale, "Kundalini is endeavoring to effect a permanent passage, tearing apart the mass [of obstruction at the top of the head], making a hole through it..." The Hopis believe that at one time, the fontanel on infants' heads remained soft in all humans throughout their lives. Through this opening, said the Chippewa spiritual teacher Sun Bear, "we were able to receive direct transmissions from the spirits." But the human race became "arrogant and hardheaded and Spirit sealed it over."

The awakening of this chakra is a transcendent experience. Spellbinding, superconscious light fills the bodymind in an explosion of a thousand inner suns. Samadhi (a deep, mystical trance state known to Christian theologians as raptus or rapture) occurs when the 7th chakra is pierced, and may happen at spontaneous intervals thereafter.

Although many traditions celebrate the seventh chakra as the gateway to the soul's liberation, in some cases I am familiar with, incomplete purification in the rest of the system may create problems when this chakra awakens. Gabriel Cousens has made the same observation: "... it has been my intuitive experience in working with people suffering from manic psychosis that their crown chakra is wide 'open'... It is so activated, in fact, that these patients' lives become imbalanced." Energy-balancing or other therapeutic treatment might be needed if the Samadhi states lead to manic or psychotic behavior.

Overview

"I am confused about Chakras in relation to consciousness," a woman told me. "Does this relate to various altered states of awareness?"

Yes, but to ordinary awareness as well. For example, the 3rd chakra is the site of personal power, and is the "ceiling level" of perception for much of the population and for Western culture. This chakra level is the stronghold of the ego, and at its worst it plays out in an adversarial or exploitive relationship to life. By contrast, those who have an awakened or very active 4th chakra (which is the heart center) are able to live inclusively, with compassion and consideration for other beings. This does not necessarily mean they are in an ecstatic state of awareness (although when the heart chakra is fully awakened, such blissful states do occur).

Christina and Stanislav Grof offer this concise explanation of the Chakras: "The degree to which the individual Chakras are open or obstructed determines the way one experiences the world and relates to it. The three lower Chakras govern the forces that drive human behavior prior to spiritual awakening -- the survival instinct, sexuality, aggression, competitiveness, and acquisitiveness. The higher Chakras represent the potential for experiences and states of being increasingly imbued with cosmic consciousness and spiritual awareness."

Prior to spiritual awakening, we remain at levels of consciousness primarily involved with personal survival and self-gratification. At the 4th, heart chakra level, genuine consideration of others is possible. Artists, musicians, orators and inventors are often very active at the 5th chakra level. Genius is associated with a powerfully active 6th chakra. Religious devotees and spiritual seekers usually have an active 7th chakra.

The awakened Chakras are more complex. An awakened 3rd chakra produces clairsentience -- the ability to feel within oneself the physical and emotional state of others. This is a "no-boundary" condition in which one becomes like a psychic sponge, taking on every sensation and emotion in the vicinity. If the heart or upper Chakras are not also awakened, this can present great difficulties. Without awareness that these physical and emotional feelings are not all our own, we can become overwhelmed, confused and panicky.

An awakened 3rd chakra also makes one extremely sensitive to any manipulative, dishonest or malevolent intent from others. The awakened individual will feel queasiness, stomach pains, nausea or may even vomit in the presence of such people. These stomach disturbances -- which can include tightness or pressure in the solar plexus region -- are an instant barometer which allows the awakened 3rd chakra person to know when she is being deceived or imposed upon.

Sometimes these 3rd chakra disturbances are a reaction to collective atmospheric energy rather than to a specific individual. I have felt nausea and tension in my solar plexus during periods of strong public controversy, i.e., the week preceding the California execution of Robert Anton Harris and the weeks leading up to the U.S. presidential election. A person with an awakened 3rd chakra simply cannot afford to tolerate abuses of power. The instant and often severe visceral reaction mandates resolution of conflict. Likewise, when one's own 3rd chakra is fully open, ruthless competition is no longer a viable avenue for establishing one's own uniqueness. It becomes too painful to lie, cheat or dominate others. A person with an active 3rd chakra can be the worst kind of power-monger, but a person with an awakened 3rd chakra is forced to learn to use his will only in the healthiest and most life-affirming ways. (Failure to recognize this lesson brings much suffering to the individual in terms of chronic, serious physical and emotional disturbance.)

While the first three Chakras are primarily concerned with personal issues, the 4th through 7th are transpersonal. Chakras do not always awaken consecutively: the 3rd may awaken before the 2nd, the 6th before the 4th, and so on.

While the awakened 3rd chakra teaches us to do no harm for the sake of self-preservation, at the level of the awakened heart, we become fully altruistic. This isn't a desire to do good, or to save

the world or other messianic ideas, which are actually 3rd chakra concepts. Rather, we are opened to the reality of other-as-self. We directly feel that what hurts one, hurts all and what helps one, helps all. At the heart level, we experience a great humility coupled with a profound awareness of the preciousness of all sentient beings. It is here, and at the 5th through 7th levels of awakening, that we open to the more glorious, rarefied realms of being.

In the Hindu philosophy, there is a complex set of symbols associated with each chakra, designating the qualities therein. Symbolically, each chakra is represented with a circular form surrounded by "petals." As the Chakras move up from the base level at the Muladhara to the Vishuddha at the throat level, the number of petals exponentially increases. What this signifies is the way life unfolds more and more at each level. After the 5th chakra, which when awakened allows us to blossom into spontaneous and genuine creative expression, comes the Ajna, or third eye. At this level are only two petals, which resemble wings. This is a fully transcendent state of consciousness. The awakened 6th opens us to wisdom; it connects us to the muses and divine inspiration. The awakened 7th enables full union with the divine (enlightenment). (There are Chakras and levels of consciousness beyond the 7th, but these openings occur independently of the risen Kundalini.) These awakened Chakras are portholes to the infinite, leading us to realms and realizations beyond the physical and beyond the mind itself.

When my Chakras were galvanized by Kundalini, I became immediately and experientially aware that certain thoughts and emotions pulled the whole energetic volume of the life force to particular chakra levels. Fear, conflict (of even a subtle form), and mundane thoughts like "I need to go to the market" and "Where did I put my glasses?" siphoned the life force into the solar plexus chakra. Any thought/feeling of appreciation or affection drew energy to the heart center. Chanting, singing (or even hearing someone else sing) drew the energy into the throat chakra. Prayers and silent repetition of mantras brought all energy into the crown chakra.

These shifts were instantaneous and almost violent in their intensity, with my energy slamming at lightning speed from chakra to chakra in perfect synchronization with my changing thoughts. It may be that the jarring impact of the shifts occurred to bring my attention to the correspondence between thought and chakra site. Once I discovered this, I was able to voluntarily move energy between Chakras. My heightened awareness -- and thus great sensitivities to these energies -- made it plain that I felt best, physically and emotionally, when I held energy in either my heart or crown chakra. But if the energy remained too long in either one, I became extremely uncomfortable. Too long in the heart built up insufferable heat and too long in the crown produced tremendous pressure within my skull. Being able to relieve these problems instantly, merely by selecting the nature of my thoughts, was a startling and welcome discovery.

The quality of life or degree of awareness does not correlate solely to the "height" of the uppermost-awakened chakra. In other words, a fully opened 7th chakra does not necessarily designate spiritual wholeness. Various teachings which counsel "proper" circulation of Kundalini through the Chakras contradict each other about which of the Chakras is the most suitable home base for intensified energies. Some traditions insist that only the 6th and 7th Chakras are spiritually viable and the rest should remain dormant. Taking the opposite stance are Tantric schools which designate the Tan Tien (second chakra) as the best center for the energy, warning

that energies housed too long in the uppermost Chakras can cause brain tumors and insanity.

According to many teachers -- and I am convinced they are right -- the most crucial chakra is not the 7th, but the 4th. If the 4th chakra remains closed, everything else in the system will be askew. The 4th (heart) chakra is strategically in the center of the chakra column. It is the balance point. Our linear idea that higher is better has no relevance here. The 4th chakra is the axis -- equidistant from all other points -- that is the most powerful and influential in the cosmos. True to its nature, this center does not promote itself to the highest station. Literally and symbolically, it hides its greatness by its unassuming position. The 4th chakra is the connecting point for the ethereal energies above and the grounding energies below: it is the place where heaven and earth meet.

Chapter 6

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

"Who is to interpret these phenomena? The traditional doctor knows nothing of energies ... and won't allow herself or himself to see. The popular consciousness movement is busy selling methods of feeling good or being more powerful." --Richard Moss

When I discovered I was experiencing Kundalini, I realized my friend Celia had been having an array of Kundalini symptoms too. For several years, she had searched futilely for help from doctors, and finally concluded she had contracted several diseases, which had not been properly diagnosed.

When I broke the news to her that she might also have risen Kundalini, she reacted strangely. She seemed to prefer the idea that her symptoms were due to disease. I asked her if the thought of Kundalini frightened her in some way. Celia admitted she wanted nothing to do with spiritual emergence because it was connected to the saints. As a child raised in Catholicism, she had hated hearing the nuns talk about the saints' terrible suffering for God. At the time she told me this, I thought she was confusing religious doctrine with something far more majestic and wonderful. I knew very little about Kundalini then...

Seven years later, it struck me that Celia had been right. Kundalini does seem implicated in the suffering of the saints of all traditions. It has certainly been an agent of suffering for many of the rest of us who have felt the Shakti Goddess' electrifying hand.

I don't know if Celia's refusal to acknowledge what I still suspect was her awakened Kundalini spared her any pain. Soon afterward, she severed our friendship. It was obvious that my welcoming embrace of my own transformation was so threatening to her she couldn't afford to keep me in her life.

Kundalini has brought me Suffering with a capital S -- the serpent's fangs drew blood. Before I was plunged into Kundalini's fire, I regarded suffering as something dreadful to be avoided at all costs. I now have come to understand it more as Viktor Frankl did when he wrote "What is to give light must endure burning."

No one escapes suffering in this world; it's part of the earthly landscape. But not everyone who experiences Kundalini gets tossed into the flames. For some, after Kundalini is most active, Her touch is that of merciful healer, and their lives begin to improve on all sides. People who have primarily experienced Kundalini's benevolence are most eager to awaken Her in others, and perplexed when some of their protégés have serious problems with the process.

I've also heard of cases where Kundalini phenomena remained fairly blissful for years before the process became more arduous, and vice versa. Some people rejoice when Kundalini awakens in them despite the difficulties; others are terrified even when their experiences have been painless and beautiful. Our responses and the course of our particular Kundalini odyssey can't be measured against a classic standard because every pattern is unique.

Understandably, this makes many people nervous; they want to know what to expect next. But Kundalini can't be charted. This is a major part of awakening -- being shaken loose of the idea that we know what's up. Kundalini is one knock-your-socks-off surprise after another, restoring our appreciation of the great mystery of existence.

Something's Going on Here...

Over the past five years, I have made contact with hundreds of people who have experienced the process of psychospiritual transformation. Many of these people, upon realizing the cause of their symptoms, have recognized that some of their friends and acquaintances have been having similar baffling disturbances. Some of them have been devout spiritual seekers; others had little overt interest in spirituality prior to their Kundalini awakening. No single pattern or myth seems to fit.

Something miraculous seems to be going on here, but by and large, few people know much about the Kundalini process. Over and over again I hear the same story from people who have been unexpectedly initiated into this process: they have run the gamut from finding no information to being given damaging misinformation. When I began doing research to help me understand and cope with my own experience, I was likewise faced with a glut of occult, esoteric, New Age and other material which was often worse than useless. Gene Kieffer, president of the Kundalini Research Foundation, refers to these pseudo-resources as "metaphysical junkfood." While there are quite a number of books written about Kundalini from an eastern perspective, these rarely address the concerns of individuals experiencing endogenous Kundalini awakening. Worse, most of them claim that spontaneous awakening is exceedingly rare and in some way flawed. Unless one has an affinity for yogic/Hindu cosmology, these texts, which describe the Kundalini process in abstruse, highly symbolic language, can confuse and frighten rather than educate those trying to decipher their own experiences.

For centuries, awareness of spiritual awakening has been suppressed in Western civilization. Dating from the Christian church's religious-political expulsion of the Gnostics and on through the scourges of the Inquisition, revealing information about these sacred processes was an invitation to torture and death. Even in Eastern cultures, outside of obscure scriptures, the arousal of the Kundalini was clandestine knowledge denied to all but privileged adepts.

In recent times, although certain groups remain intolerant, we in the "free world" are no longer subject to government-sanctioned religious persecution. I have no desire to return to the tyrannical days of yore when speaking earnestly held such dire penalty, where only those who were willing to give their lives for the truth dared speak at all. But today we have the flip side of religious freedom, where anyone who can draw a crowd or woo a publisher can claim to be in possession of arcane wisdom.

Throughout the world, people are looking for greater spiritual connection in their lives. The mushrooming number of multi-modality teachers and healers recognizes this hunger. Meditation, visualization, prayer groups, channeling, drumming, crystals, guided imagery, trance-inducing breathwork, mask making, sacred rituals, somatic therapies, psychic healing, firewalking, yoga: never before has such a metaphysical potpourri been available to the seeker. Many of these

healing and consciousness-raising tools are being offered in good faith, while others are hawked by peddlers less concerned with what nourishes the soul than with what feeds their egos and their bankrolls. I have a Brahman Hindu friend who was totally flabbergasted to come across an organization charging money -- "a whole lot of money" -- to activate the Kundalini. His shock was akin to what a Christian might feel upon discovering a New Age group selling the sacrament of the Eucharist. As an American, the reduction of anything and everything to merchandise is not so surprising to me, but I am sorely put off by promotions of Kundalini as a biopsychic power tool.

Kundalini is hardly an easy way to enhance one's sexual prowess and social standing, or a means of bringing some excitement into a ho-hum lifestyle. Yet anything as fraught with mystery and extraordinary potential as Kundalini is susceptible to misrepresentation and fraud. Too many Kundalini teachers and healers refuse to admit that spiritual awakening is an extremely complex, consuming, and potentially dangerous process.

In a New Age publication, I came across an advertisement for a six-week course, which teaches participants how to "run the Kundalini" and achieve enlightenment, all for a bargain price of only \$550. Such bogus training sessions perpetuate the notion that raising Kundalini is some kind of parlor trick that can easily be accomplished over a weekend or in one's spare time. A man who must have graduated from such a course now claims to be in command of occult forces. He tells his pagan pals that he can "set" himself at "full power, on-line" and emit invisible bursts of Kundalini energy to insure the success of magical rituals.

Carl Jung once remarked that he had never seen a case of Western yoga practice "that was not applied with the wrong purpose of getting still more on top -- to acquire more power or more control, either of their own body, or of other people, or of the world...." Yoga, which means "union," was never intended to serve the ego in this way.

I once came across another advertisement for a workshop purporting to teach awakening of the Kundalini. The ad seductively described the state of immediate relaxation and unfettered happiness, which was supposed to occur as soon as Kundalini rises. I remarked to Charles that it made it sound like there was no difference between Kundalini awakening and shooting heroin.

It is irresponsible to give people instructions on raising Kundalini without any spiritual understanding of what they are doing. Through our newsletter and Internet exchanges, Charles and I regularly hear from the casualties of irresponsible promotion of Kundalini as a means to personal power and entertainment. It is not only the teachers who are to blame; there are plenty of people greedy for the super-powers these teachers promise, who apparently have to learn the hard way that these tremendous, sacred energies are not psychodynamic toys.

What's Sex Got To Do With It?

I once tuned into a cable TV station where a grinning author was promoting her new book on life transitions. At around the age of forty, she proclaimed, everyone's Kundalini fires up. But she quickly dismissed Kundalini as an antiquated term for "erotic energy." According to this gushing

author, when the "erotic energy" bursts forth at mid-life, everyone experiences a second wind of physical vitality and sexual renewal.

There is a grain of truth in what she says. According to what I've been told by the Spiritual Emergence Network, a large portion of callers undergoing Kundalini awakenings are women in their forties. Anthropologist Joan B. Townsend, in her acknowledgment that some of the most powerful shamans are women, "especially after menopause," seems to indicate a higher incidence of Kundalini awakenings past middle age. Even so, the number of women calling SEN (or becoming shamans) falls a few short of the world's over-forty population.

Many yogis and other religious aspirants believe that celibacy promotes spiritual awakening, and that the Kundalini is, in fact, rechanneled sexual energy. Neither I, nor the majority of people I know who have an active Kundalini, have consciously sublimated or otherwise redirected our sexual energy. In both Eastern and Western religious writings, there is a negative preoccupation with sexuality. Great emphasis is placed on subduing, redirecting, or altogether renouncing sexual activity. Eastern doctrine denigrates sexual expression as a gross, impure, and spiritually impeding use of the life force. Their Christian counterpart has from its inception equated celibacy with holiness, regarding biological life as basically corrupt and detrimental to the soul. Pagan and shamanic cultures have looked upon sexuality quite differently, seeing it as integral to spirituality. Many sacred rites included overt sexuality as a means of accessing the Divine. Sexuality in the earth centered religions, while held in equal esteem with spiritual ecstasy, was generally carefree and uncomplicated. While marriage seems to be a universal human institution, monogamy and celibacy are not.

Indigenous historian Robert Lawlor asserts that among the Gnostics and the Zealots, male celibacy (and in some sects, castration) were practiced under the belief that "sublimated sexual energy was supposed to provide men with a spiritual power of creativity higher and more significant than women's natural power to give birth."

The practice of asceticism in various sky-god and masculine religions may have also evolved from a misguided attempt to return to the pristine innocence and spiritual purity found in archaic cultures. For instance, the Aborigines, who lived without personal possessions or material attachments while existing in a state of perpetual heightened consciousness, known as "Dreamtime." However, Aboriginal and other Goddess cultures were not erotically restrained and remained sexually active throughout their lives. For women in particular, sexuality was considered a birthright and female sacrament, to be enjoyed until late into old age. It was in fact considered dangerous to the harmony of the community for a woman to be sexually frustrated or cut off from sexual activity.

There is a direct correlation between right brain activity (dreams, creativity, intuition, psychic perception and mystical experience) and heightened sensuality and sexual appetite. The popular dumb blonde bombshell image of Hollywood females of the 1950's was a degenerate simulation of the erotic vitality of women in right-brained dominant Goddess cultures. Kundalini increases the flow of electromagnetic energy in the body so much that it throws off compass readings and plays havoc with wristwatches and electrical equipment. The energy is often felt rising from left foot and leg -- the negatively charged feminine half of the body. Studies have shown that the

positively charged south pole of a magnet stimulates right-brain activity as well as producing greater metabolic warmth, more rapid healing of wounds, increased oxygen utilization and enhanced sexual vigor-- all phenomena associated with Kundalini! It seems that Kundalini involves an increased flow of positively charged electromagnetic energy from the earth into the receptive negatively charged left side of the body. At no point in my own Kundalini process has sexual activity had negative consequences. (On a few occasions, the opposite has been true. Trying to ignore or repress heightened sexual energies has resulted in physical sickness and emotional distress for me.) I know of plenty of other married and lovingly-coupled men and women whose risen Kundalini did not require (or result from) sexual abstinence.

According to Gopi Krishna and his devoted long time associate, Gene Kieffer, the majority of India's illumined sages on record were married and had children (and some had more than one wife). Throughout his writings, Gopi Krishna stressed his belief that Kundalini arousal was biologically correlated with "reversal of the reproductive system and its functioning more as an evolutionary than as a reproductive mechanism." But to Krishna, there was a clear distinction between this and sexual activity, which ordinarily will neither awaken nor deter Kundalini. (Many so-called Tantric sects which purport to be spiritual groups are more aligned with swingers clubs. The worship of sex in itself and indiscriminate, orgiastic sex practices rarely spark Kundalini.)

Irina Tweedie's Sufi guru told her: "Kundalini is not sex-impulse alone; but sex-power forms part of Kundalini." From what I have read and been told, it does seem that the sexual organs undergo changes during the Kundalini process. Swami Muktananda, Ram Dass, B.S. Goel, Gabriel Cousens and Gopi Krishna all describe incidents where they experienced strange genital sensations, including painful erections and seeing or feeling their semen stream up into the sushuma (central spinal canal).

Women sometimes report suction sensations (with or without sexual arousal) at the cervix, or a bubbling or vibrating genital energy. In his writings, Gopi Krishna speaks of being approached by a woman who asked him, "Can this be the way to God? As you are saying, I am experiencing the most abominable sensations inside." When he questioned her about the sensations, she replied, "I can't even speak of them; they are the usual sensations associated with sex." And Irina Tweedie, who was a widowed proper European woman in her mid-fifties when her Kundalini rose, experienced an unexpected flood of sexual desire which was "uncontrollable, a kind of wild, cosmic force." She gave a detailed account of this in her journal, which has since been published under the title *Daughter of Fire*: "Never, not even in its young days, had this body known anything, even faintly comparable, or similar to this! This was not just desire -- it was madness in its lowest, animal form, a paroxysm of sex-craving... a wild howling of everything female in me, for a male... But the inexplicable thing was that even the idea of any kind of intercourse was repulsive and did not even occur to me."

When the Kundalini rises, it may initially enliven the second chakra, which is the sexual center of the body. During these early stages of the process, one may go through episodes of inflamed passion. But we may just as likely experience surges of grief, rage, ecstasy, or any other powerful feelings when Kundalini-Ma engages us. The thrust of the Kundalini is toward revitalization. She infuses us with the throbbing energies of life, which includes sexuality as well

as the many realms of the Spirit.

Kundalini and Menopause

There does seem to be a correlation between menopause and the rising of Kundalini, but to exactly what degree remains unknown. In the Fall 1994 issue of the KRN newsletter (the official publication of the Kundalini Research Network), in a column called "Ask Dr. K," a 48 year old women wrote in asking "How do you tell the difference between menopausal hot flashes and the heat sensations related to Kundalini?" This woman said she had been in a Kundalini process for the past 7-8 years and was now experiencing hot flashes and wondered if hormonal replacement therapy would be appropriate in her case. Dr. Yvonne Kason replied that "we do not yet know the effects of most drugs upon the Kundalini process" and said she recommended drugs only as a last resort "because a person in a Kundalini process is often very sensitive to subtle side-effects of drugs."

On occasion, I have felt extreme heat in my body from the beginning of my own Kundalini process. In later years, I have been experiencing menopausal symptoms, including irregular periods and hot flashes at night. For me, the Kundalini heat and the hormonal hot flashes have been qualitatively different. Kundalini heat, in my case, has been more intense (although it never caused sweating). The hormonal hot flashes feel as though I have suddenly been enveloped by humid, tropical heat, whereas Kundalini heat is like a white hot conflagration in my very bone marrow. With Kundalini, I know the heat is emanating from my own body, while with menopausal hot flashes, I sweat a lot and cannot distinguish my body heat from external temperatures. I have to check the thermostat to see if the room is inordinately hot, or if it's just me. Also, my hot flashes generally last between 5-15 minutes, while Kundalini heat has at times continued unabated for hours.

These personal experiences lead me to believe that Kundalini heat and hormonal hot flashes are not the same thing. But others report different experiences with Kundalini heat, including extreme night sweats. Men and women of all ages have reported these, so they cannot be solely attributable to estrogen shortages! Other than the heat, there are a number of typical menopausal symptoms that coincide with Kundalini symptoms:

1. Skin sensitivities, including the "hair shirt" syndrome (described in Chapter Three), that is clinically known as "formication."
2. Sense of an electrical charge or static electricity in the brain.
3. Headaches
4. Gastrointestinal distress
5. Dizziness
6. Heart palpitations

7. Fatigue; sleep disturbances (often due to hot flashes)

8. Emotional volatility; depression

However, there are other distinguishing menopausal symptoms which are rarely encountered during Kundalini awakening, such as joint pains, breast tenderness, frequent urination or incontinence, and other sex-hormone related problems. While some menopausal women experience energy rushes, they do not report kriyas or whole body sensations of astonishing electricity. They mention no dramatic mystical, psychic or paranormal experiences; nor do they complain of hypersensitivity to environmental forces -- all of these manifestations indicating an opening of the Chakras, which occurs when Kundalini has risen. (Women who do experience all these things may well be in the midst of both the climactic and Kundalini awakening.)

Although there are some authors who regard menopause, as a time of Kundalini arousal, it seems evident that not every menopausal woman experiences Kundalini awakening, just as not every individual with a risen Kundalini is a menopausal woman.

Overcoming Stereotypes

There are teachers and healers who regard Kundalini difficulties as disorders which occur when one has failed to voluntarily and diligently keep house in one's psyche. These allegations suggest that if only we had "done everything right" in our spiritual practices, in our choice of a healthy lifestyle and in our psychological inner work, we wouldn't be paying big dues now. This is much the same kind of thinking many people take toward adversity in general. Sy Safransky, journalist and editor of *The Sun* magazine, describes this attitude. He wrote in his poignant memorial to Stephen Schwartz, who died of cancer at the age of forty-three: "I wanted to believe that eating a healthy diet, getting plenty of exercise, not smoking, and, most importantly, living authentically and compassionately granted a person some kind of immunity. Yet spiritual teachers seem to die of cancer as frequently as the rest of us. Death welcomes them no matter how pure their diet or noble their thoughts."

In life as in death, even those who are exceptionally disciplined and have dedicated themselves to spiritual self-development can have chaotic and painful transformation processes. Gopi Krishna, whose harrowing twelve year Kundalini awakening began when he was thirty-five, had been meditating daily since the age of seventeen. In the beginning of his autobiography, he states "Long practice had accustomed me to sit in the same posture for hours at a time without the least discomfort..." Both Krishnamurti and Swami Muktananda had been following austere religious disciplines since early adolescence. Yet all three of them underwent lengthy and difficult awakenings.

Swami Muktananda went so far as to claim that the more dynamic process was granted to "a seeker who is steadfast and full of devotion to his guru." Carlos Castaneda's Yaqui Indian benefactor, don Juan, seemed to be describing Kundalini awakening when he spoke of a physical power that develops for the initiate "on the path of knowledge." This power or energy is first felt as an itching or burning, and then progresses to great discomfort. Don Juan seems to be in agreement with Muktananda when he says: "Sometimes the pain and discomfort are so great that

the warrior has convulsions for months, the more severe the convulsions the better for him. A fine power is always heralded by great pain."

The ayurvedic physician Robert Svoboda's Aghori yoga guru, Vimalananda, was particularly infuriated by people who made glib claims about how easily Kundalini could be aroused and controlled. Kundalini is a tremendous force, he exclaimed, and few people can handle such power "This is why I get so wild when I read about all those people in America who claim either to have had their own Kundalini awakened painlessly, or to be awakening the Kundalini of all and sundry effortlessly. Don't ask me to believe such drivel. If it were so all of America would have merged with the infinite by now."

While the wheels of change are slowly turning, it is the rare psychiatrist or therapist who has expertise with Kundalini; even fewer medical doctors have the slightest awareness of it. Although Lee Sannella (himself a retired psychiatrist and ophthalmologist) and others have made courageous attempts to inform doctors and hospitals of the Kundalini symptoms, they have been fairly well ignored. To traditional physicians who are locked into the Cartesian mindset, the idea that spiritual energies exist, much less that they have the power to create disruption in the body, is inconceivable. This is a real obstacle for those of us who are manifesting severe physical symptoms. Hordes of us have been subjected to a diagnostic battery of CAT scans, MRIs, EMGs, brain scans, blood tests, etc., with negative or inconclusive results that leave us and our doctors more baffled than ever. Or we have received inaccurate diagnoses and inappropriate, ineffectual and sometimes harmful medications and treatments.

I know of three women who were unable to leave their beds for the first year of their Kundalini process. One of these women had a compassionate doctor who nonetheless was at such a loss to account for her condition that he broke down and wept when another of her endless tests proved inconclusive. This particular woman's Kundalini awakening lasted four and a half years. At no point during her process did she know what was happening to her, but because so many profound changes occurred in her life because of it, she had dubbed it "the mutation disease."

When Gopi Krishna wrote his autobiographical account of his own spectacular Kundalini awakening, he was afraid he would be perceived as a ranting crackpot. His fears were not unfounded; for a long time, no publisher would touch the manuscript. A friend of mine, writing of her own experiences during her six year awakening, remarked wistfully, "There is no way I can prove that these things really happened to me." Fearing that we will not be believed, or actually having our attempts to explain met with ridicule and ostracism, is why many of us who have Kundalini experiences are reluctant to admit to them. A number of contributors to Shared Transformation request that their stories be printed anonymously; there remains a very real threat that their jobs or their reputations could be lost if they were "found out." But many of us who are going through intense Kundalini awakenings cannot hide what is happening from others; the physical, mental and emotional changes are too consuming and dramatic to conceal.

The authentic literature says Kundalini awakening can eventually lead to wondrous physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well being. I've already tasted some of these fruits, so I believe this is true. Prior to 1991, I thought that with rare exceptions, only devout aspirants who followed rigorous spiritual disciplines could have Kundalini awakenings. I had imagined that this

harrowing but ultimately benevolent process was the reward of unremitting orthodox practice. When my Kundalini arose, this and many more of my long held assumptions were blown to pieces. I began meeting others who were in the midst of dramatic Kundalini awakenings. Not one of these people fit "the profile" before their awakening. We had all been highly sensitive people; most of us had experienced some degree of psychic awareness earlier in our lives. Each of us had a hunger for communion with life/God/others, and a strong desire to learn about the mysterious and magical side of existence. Here the similarities between us ended.

Our religious backgrounds, ages, race, gender and lifestyles were diverse. Some of us had previous exposure to, or interest in eastern religious practices such as yoga, meditation, or spiritual studies. Some had adhered to Judeo/Christian beliefs; others were involved in New Age systems. While some had experimented heavily with psychedelic drugs, others had little or no drug experience.

A woman in her late sixties wrote and asked me "Aren't I too old to be going through this?" two weeks before another woman, thirty-years-old, asked me "Aren't I too young to be experiencing this?" Kundalini phenomena can begin any time in life from early childhood to advanced old age. One can also be born with a risen Kundalini. In a case where this had happened, the person told me it was not until she was in her thirties that she realized everyone else didn't experience regular, blissful rushes of energy powerful enough to make her eyes tear and her hair stand on end.

There is no telling just how many of us are undergoing Kundalini. Psychiatrist John Nelson, who distinguishes between transcendent and pathological states of altered consciousness in his book, *Healing the Split*, said that he had only encountered one case of Kundalini awakening in his twenty years of psychiatric practice. On the other hand, spiritual leader Ram Dass confides "I get phone calls all the time, as I imagine the Spiritual Emergence Network does, from people who are having Kundalini experiences." Apparently, whatever our numbers, we are scattered near and far. Those of us in radical transformation occupy every strata of society. The people I have heard from who are experiencing Kundalini include business owners, executives, artists, scientists, healers, psychologists, lawyers, therapists, doctors, writers, astrologers, firefighters, scholars, poets, social activists, clerical workers, ministers, college students and homemakers. We can't be found in any specific interest group or community. No one knows just how many of us there are, or where all of us are.

I had imagined that there would be more of us gathered in places like important Eastern religious centers, especially those whose teachings center on the raising of the Kundalini. To my astonishment, I discovered this was untrue. At one point in my own awakening, I called such a renowned local ashram for a referral to a dentist who could deal with the involuntary jerking movements of my kriyas. The receptionist at the center told me they didn't give referrals; furthermore, she said she did not know of anyone locally -- devotee or otherwise -- who had actually had a Kundalini awakening! While a number of these yoga and meditation centers are aware of mild symptoms and transcendent Kundalini experiences, they seem to have little cognizance of the complexities of the process.

Many Eastern religions teach that Kundalini is awakened through the guru -- usually by

transmission of spiritual energy known as "shaktipat." A few people experiencing spontaneous Kundalini arousal told me they had received shaktipat from such gurus -- some a decade or more prior to the unleashing of their Kundalini. Was this a factor? In several cases, traumatic events such as the death of a loved one or a physical accident preceded the most severe Kundalini symptoms. For others, meditation, prayer, bodywork or breathwork seemed to be the immediate catalyst. In cases like my own, there was no evident external trigger.

Kundalini Variations

In certain religious and psychological circles, there is quite a bit of nitpicking about what signs and symptoms constitute a real Kundalini awakening. These arguments often fail to take into account that the process can continue for a lifetime, and that in this time frame, an incredible spectrum of manifestations can occur.

Not everyone experiences Kundalini in the same way. Among the traditions that acknowledge and describe Kundalini awakening, the teachings or scriptures offer a model of this process, not an accurate depiction of how it affects each individual. When the model is mistaken for a precise definition of the Kundalini process, it proves to be of little help to those who are experiencing the Serpent Fire firsthand.

In the early stages, people may experience only a few of the classical hallmarks of the risen Kundalini. For some, the process begins with a sublime mystical revelation. For others, it isn't until relatively late in the process that mystical and paranormal events occur. Eastern sagas of Kundalini tell of initiates swooning in supersensual bliss. Euphoria and ecstasy are Kundalini's enchanting calling cards, but not everyone gets such a lovely introduction to the Shakti Goddess. Bliss may be a long time coming. I have not been graced with much in the way of physical delights in my own process. There have been times when I've enjoyed mildly pleasant energy rushes (usually immediately after a Kriya, although these sensations only last a few seconds). I have had mystical experiences that were ecstatic... yet these occurred long before my Kundalini rose. From what others report to me, it seems that when the bodily symptoms are as extreme as mine have been, the early years of the process are rarely blissful.

Great peace of mind is a welcome gift of spiritual awakening. I experienced sublime peace once, years before Kundalini, during a near death episode. Never since have I experienced such perfect tranquillity. The absence of many of the coveted positive Kundalini effects in my personal awakening may make me an exception to the rule, but as of this writing I have box loads of letters from similar "exceptions." Of the commonly experienced joys of the Spirit, the greatest that Kundalini has thus far bequeathed to me is joy itself. This and an ongoing, deepening of love I feel for and from Charles, life and the Spirit has lit my way through some of the desolate stretches of my journey thus far.

Feeling powerful is another oft mentioned Kundalini attribute. I certainly have felt filled to overflowing by Kundalini's potent force, but at no time did I sense this power was mine. There are also many reports of feeling supremely safe and protected -- almost to the point of invincibility -- during intense Kundalini episodes. This sense of divine safety I too have been granted. In my case, it was not that I felt removed from harm so much as my heightened perspective enabled me to see all that happened as the perfect workings of the Tao. During the

most spectacular months of my awakening, I was surprisingly calm, almost fearless.

The length of time spent in altered states varies, which makes quite a difference in their impact on our daily functioning. Some may only last a few minutes, or they may continue uninterrupted for days, weeks or months. Once Kundalini is fully active, the process often lasts for many years. Even those with shorter experiences may find that brief but dramatic episodes recur in their lives during a five to twenty year period.

Those who have had relatively short and easy (and often partial) awakenings frequently make the false assumption that everyone's process should conclude quickly. There is a strong, unfortunate tendency to believe that the way one's own unfolding occurred is precisely the way it should be for everyone else. Such narcissistic thinking leads to all sorts of useless criticism and poor advice. Everyone I know who has undergone a prolonged Kundalini awakening has been told by at least one professed "expert" that he or she was definitely not experiencing Kundalini. People who have never themselves had Kundalini experiences are often more eager and evangelical in spelling out what is a "real" process than those who have actually gone through it themselves.

A subtle or overt jockeying for position occurs among quite a few spiritual mavens, each trying to claim ultimate authority and superiority of his/her path. Many teachers whose Kundalini was self-induced regard spontaneous Kundalini awakenings as premature and inauspicious. Turning the tables, Gopi Krishna, whose Kundalini erupted spontaneously and very unexpectedly, considers unbidden awakening preferable and calls intentional arousal of Kundalini forced and unnatural.

The long years of extreme difficulties Krishna candidly describes in his autobiographical books are sometimes held up as proof of his spiritual ineptitude. His accusers display a curious amnesia when it comes to the painful and protracted awakening processes of many adherents of the do-it-yourself and guru-supervised genre. I have always gravitated to the unassuming, broad-minded teachers who acknowledge a diversity of approaches to the Spirit (without imposing a scale of values favoring their personal system).

Rather than extolling one way at the expense of the other, it makes more sense to me to consider deliberately raised Kundalini as yang evolution, and spontaneous awakening as yin evolution. Since I belong to the latter class, I can speak better to and for others likewise summoned by Kundalini than to those who have commanded her to rise. Quite honestly, for all its splendor, spiritual transformation is so tremendously difficult, I think anyone who goes out of their way to catalyze it must be exceedingly brave, naive, or crazy!

Some people want and need a teacher to lead them through their transformation -- and I do not mean "need" in the pop-pejorative use of the word, in which anything but proud independence is labeled co-dependency. A teacher is right for certain constitutions, just as others have no need of a human guide and could be impeded by one. There are teachers who strenuously object to the untutored path, some out of true concern for the initiate and some to keep drumming up business. But there will always be seekers and mentors, and a good teacher is never in danger of losing all disciples in a mass defection to autonomy.

Once the process has taken on a momentum of its own and is causing havoc, anyone who has kindled Kundalini under the auspices of an unqualified teacher or overly enthusiastic spiritual/occult practices may worry he/she did something wrong to have tampered with cosmic forces. My sense is that however Kundalini has awakened -- no matter by what system or lack of one -- it was meant to be. Rather than torment ourselves over what we might have done differently, our sentiments are more wisely spent directed to learning all we can to make the best of our situation now.

More Misconceptions

In addition to all the confusing mixed messages we receive from others, we have our internalized prejudices that add to our doubt. These internal demon-guardians of the Gate prevent us from fully entering the Sacred. In my own case, I had a hard time feeling worthy of my awakening, because I didn't feel that I was "advanced" enough to merit such a gift. Like many others, I'd bought into the idea that only saints experienced radical flowering of consciousness. Ideas such as "only renunciates and those who live austerely make genuine spiritual progress," or "only those who regularly meditate, pray, or engage in devout religious practices have powerful spiritual experiences," are among the common misleading spiritual stereotypes. Other misconceptions include:

- * Visualizing (or mental concentration) is sufficient (or always required) to rouse and safely direct the movement of the Kundalini.
- * Unless one is serene, passionless, detached, and is in control of the mind and senses, one cannot experience higher levels of consciousness.
- * Spiritual experiences are always uplifting, beautiful and welcome.
- * People whose consciousness is evolving are constantly "high" and radiant with happiness.
- * Other people can easily see there is something special and mystical about those who are having spiritual awakenings.
- * Spiritual experiences are ethereal and only effect the soul -- they never involve the body or the "negative" emotions.
- * A true Kundalini awakening occurs as an instantaneous flash of total enlightenment.
- * Only five people in the history of the world (or some infinitesimal number) really have a risen Kundalini.
- * Those who undergo transformational processes are superior to other people.

All of these assumptions are simply untrue. Those who have transformational experiences don't fit into any one mold or myth. "Decadent" bleached blondes with flashy wardrobes and lots of makeup are just as likely to undergo spiritual awakening as neo-Amish type virgins. Those who

meticulously follow ordained spiritual practices appear to have no advantage over those who adhere to no specific regime. Even spiritual aspirants and faithful believers aren't exclusive prospects; to their surprise too, atheists and agnostics also experience spiritual awakening.

Glenn Morris, Ph.D., is a prime example. A Ninja master, who is an avowed agnostic, Morris defies stereotyping. Awakening the Kundalini "has nothing to do with healthy lifestyle," he contends, "and nothing to do with eating rice and being a vegetarian." Prior to his Kundalini awakening, he smoked, drank Scotch and ate red meat with gusto. He induced his own awakening and teaches others to do the same using Chi Kung meditation techniques. Even so, he says that when his Kundalini rose, it almost cost him his life. It took nine years to heal the nerve damage incurred when the energy skyrocketed with such force it nearly blew his head off.

People who consider themselves "spiritually correct" are often more antagonistic toward spiritual emergence in anyone who doesn't fit the bill than are the hard-core materialists and skeptics who disdain anything spiritual. Anyone who has experienced Kundalini outside the auspices of a religious tradition knows what I'm talking about. Dogmatic types are also most likely to try to commandeer someone else's process, giving irrelevant instructions and unnecessary dire warnings.

Dropping Expectations

As punitive as other people's judgments can be, the most formidable obstacles are those we harbor in our own minds. Our images of who we should be or what is true begin to crumble as we spiritually evolve. For some of us, the realization that something greater than materialist science and human ingenuity are at work here can be shattering. New realities that break through as consciousness unfurls can be disturbing and bewildering. It takes work to integrate spontaneous insights and mystical experiences that have no place in one's previously accepted reality model. Marilyn Ferguson, a frontier reporter on consciousness research, has described the double-edged sword of mystical experience: "The mind now knows what the heart had only hoped for. But the same experience can be deeply distressing to one unprepared for it, who must then try to fit it into an inadequate belief system."

There can also be vacillations in our personal needs and desires, which alarm us. At certain points in the process, those of us who have been health-conscious or vegetarians develop cravings for "forbidden" foods, such as sweets and meat. Erstwhile self-sacrificing individuals find themselves needing to withdraw and say no to other people's demands. Those who have embraced celibacy or sexual moderation might be horrified to discover their passions smoldering. These and many other changes in the transformational process can be a torturous inner war if we cling to stereotypes of what is absolutely right, good, or pure. If we think anger is un-spiritual, we'll be mortified when we go through episodes of emotional catharsis. If we have deified certain foods, we'll feel guilty and miserable when our bodies demand that we eat differently. If we have disowned or repressed any part of ourselves, the transformational process is sure to bring these parts back with a vengeance. The more we try to push these "wrong" parts away, the more painful our struggle.

Even improvements in our lives can be unsettling at first. Alan Arkin describes how he reacted

when he discovered one morning that his habitual, compulsive and frenetic pattern had dissolved: "After a couple of minutes, when nothing locked into place as an urgent demand, a must do, my reaction was one of terror... Half a dozen things were equally balanced. And this ability to choose, calmly and in an orderly way, threw me into a panic."

For those who have tried to be "good" people, by whatever standard, the most devastating part of the process may come when the "goodness" is stripped away. I don't believe this happens simply to expose our hidden negativity. It's also dissolution of attachments which are blocking our awareness. It is relatively easy to see the benefit of letting go of greed, malice, deceit, etc. It's harder to recognize that our ideals and lofty expectations are equal entrapments which bar us from the truth. All the stereotypes, even the beautiful ones, are ultimately crippling. Every preconception limits awareness. If any generalization can be made about spiritual evolution, it is this: It's never quite what we expected it to be.

Chapter 7

LIFTING THE VEIL

"We and the universe are full of unknown, changing dimensions, and no space journey could be as interesting or as far-reaching as the journey into our own many mansions." -- Dorothy Maclean

"There are no unnatural or supernatural phenomena, only very large gaps in our knowledge of what is natural... We should strive to fill those gaps of ignorance." -- Edgar Mitchell Apollo 14 Astronaut

The world we are collectively conditioned to uphold as real begins to fluctuate as Kundalini opens doors to hitherto hidden dimensions. Suddenly we are perceiving and responding to life from a very different vantage point. At first, our newly awakening faculties and magnified perceptions are disconcerting, even as they fill us with wonder. The paranormal, mystical and psychic aspects of spiritual awakening are most daunting for those whose prior worldview excluded the possibility of such phenomena. I have mentioned the mental struggle of rationality-bound thinkers when confronted with "illogical" experiences. Their dread of insanity is matched by the terror Kundalini catalyzes for those whose religious training condemned as evil all psychic and paranormal manifestation. When confronted with evidence that flies in the face of whatever we have believed to be true, we have two choices: (1) We can deny the reality of our experiences, rejecting the testimony of our mind and senses; or (2) We can re-evaluate our prior beliefs and learn what we can through direct experience and honest examination of our own heart and soul. The second choice gives us permission, perhaps for the first time in our lives, to trust in ourselves.

Hypersensitivity

Once the Kundalini has risen, the sensory (and extrasensory) faculties become intensified. Heightened sensitivity is also frequently reported in the wake of NDE's and other encounters with the extraordinary. Super-sensitivity results from experiences that leave us psychically wide open. In his autobiography *Of Water and the Spirit*, the African shaman Malidoma Some says that those who are newly initiated are "as vulnerable as a sick person who has passed the most critical stage of his or her illness and is now convalescing." The American healer/shaman Vicki Noble explains it this way: "Whereas it seems that the skin is the boundary of the person in 'normal' reality, when that same person opens psychically, the boundary expands. The person feels herself extending out beyond the body, taking up more space, feeling things in an extrasensory way. What we took for granted as a kind of density in the physical realm is suddenly called into question on every level."

There was a period in my awakening when for over a span of five or six months, my consciousness soared increasingly higher, evaporating my ordinary boundaries. Every few days I would find my awareness expanding in unexpected and often uncomfortable ways. At times, even my body seemed to dissolve in a staggering radiance of omnipresent energy. I developed

hypersensitivity to both physical and mental vibrations. Everything became greatly amplified: colors were extremely vivid, odors pungent, tastes exquisite and sounds penetrating. As my hearing became more acute, if someone so much as dropped a pencil in the other room, I jumped as if a door had slammed. Sounds ceased to have an external quality; instead, every noise seemed to explode somewhere deep inside my brain.

I became painfully sensitive to the coarse and strident mental/subtle-field energy that is generally regarded as normal human output. I found I couldn't tolerate any programs on TV but nature documentaries. Eventually even these became too jarring. As my condition intensified, even if I wasn't watching television myself (and was in another part of the house), if someone else turned it on, I would feel as if psychic shrapnel was exploding out of the TV set. This would jolt me into painful bodily seizures. (Several other people with awakened Kundalini told me they experienced this same progression of intolerance for television "vibes.")

I've always loved to read, but here too, I found myself reacting adversely to anything written from ordinary third chakra consciousness (which covers the majority of printed material). I would feel physical pain (particularly in my solar plexus) when I tried to read these things. At the same time, I craved sacred writings: the Bible, the Upanishads, the yoga sutras, Buddhist texts, Native American and other ancient spiritual teachings, mystical poetry, etc. These scriptures were sustenance for me. At the pinnacle of my altered state, focusing to read anything was impossible. I became sensitized to electric fields and discovered I couldn't be in the vicinity of operating electrical appliances (even a gently humming computer) without feeling electric shocks and disturbances in my aura. When meditating or asleep, this sensitivity was more exaggerated. My psychic and physical energies were so fragile and tenuously balanced at this time that the slightest stimulus would throw me into turmoil. For several months, if Charles so much as brushed his hand against me in our sleep, I would go into painful convulsions. Once, when Charles took a shower, I felt as if the earth's gravitational pull had suddenly increased tenfold. All the energy in my body was draining down to my feet. I couldn't tell if my energy was following the sound of the water flowing in the shower, or if it was being drawn by a magnetic pull from the water itself. Either way, it was a very strange experience.

My psychic antennae grew so acute that I overreacted to the slightest tension in the atmosphere. If anyone in my vicinity was even mildly annoyed or worried about something, I would immediately be overcome by nausea. Other people's thoughts and feelings toward me had a strong psychic impact, even though I was living in almost total seclusion. Before the phone rang, I would know who was calling and the emotional state of the person making the call. Several friends and family members were concerned about me during this time, unable to accept that I was actually having a psychospiritual experience. Their worry sent out waves of fear that hit me like a blunted physical blow in the pit of my stomach. I felt no personal fear, but I did experience gut-wrenching physical distress from this. I could also feel people praying for me. The first time this happened, I became aware of a powerful but wondrous energy washing through the top of my head. Suddenly, though I cannot explain how, I knew this energy was generated by others' prayers. This was profoundly moving to me.

During this tremendously heightened period, I discovered I could detect physical problems in other people by simply scanning their auras with my hands. When I would pass over an area of

the body that was injured, I would feel sharp, stabbing sensations in my hand. W. Brugh Joy developed this same ability after his spiritual awakening. Since he was already a MD., he was able to establish and confirm medical diagnoses in this way. I had a remarkable encounter with another psychic during this time. My only contact with this man was via the telephone. As we were talking, I could definitely feel myself being psychically explored. I literally felt something that had a very active and gently probing quality -- the sensation was very much like a little creature scurrying around within my aura (or subtle body). This man told me that my energy was so strong it was causing his body to shake so much he could hardly hold onto the phone receiver. To steady himself, he decided to put up a mental "wall." I didn't directly sense his wall, but I immediately appreciated the result: I was nearly knocked off my chair by tidal waves of my own deflected energy! This was startling but even more astonishing was that the energy boomeranging back to me had a euphoric effect. This was the most literal demonstration I had ever had of my own "good vibes." I was thrilled to be able to feel the reality of psychic forces in this unmistakable way. The man I shared this experience with was equally gratified to find someone of sufficient sensitivity to meet him at this level of consciousness.

A fascinating (and apparently lasting) development from this period of hypersensitivity has also been reported to me by numerous other people. I call it the "truth chills." Whenever something is said that contains wisdom or spiritual veracity, I feel an instant, pleasant shivery sensation. "The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth," wrote the transcendental philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. "We know the truth when we see it, let skeptic and scoffer say what they choose." And when the soul speaks through the body, we also know the truth when we feel it! During my most sensitive periods, I have to be careful about what I eat. I've discovered that during these times, my system cannot tolerate foods cooked at any restaurant. Ram Dass has said that one of his teachers warned him against eating any cooked food that was not prepared with love, although Ram Dass felt that it was not until one entered the high-vibrational states that the "loveless" energy permeating the food had immediate and harmful effects. (For some people, the hypersensitive condition can somatize as allergies to foods, chemicals, or just about anything else in the environment.)

Going out in public -- especially where there are crowds -- can be an ordeal for someone who is hypersensitive. Temporary agoraphobia (a misnomer which literally translates as fear of open spaces but, in this case, is actually avoidance of psychic bombardment emitting from the general populace) is common among those whose Kundalini is very active. The disturbance has nothing to do with an unbalanced mental/emotional state; it results from the individual's undefended and vastly heightened receptivity to ambient, chaotic energies broadcast by the public. To someone who has never experienced the raw vulnerability of psychic openness, this may seem like a paranoid and hackneyed excuse for shyness or asocial behavior. The fact is that many people who have these psychic-sponge experiences were socially gregarious and extroverted personalities -- in some cases, less fearful than average -- prior to their Kundalini awakening. Stage fright (or fear of public speaking) is the most common phobia reported by otherwise "normal" people, and in my own case, all throughout my twenties and thirties, I thought nothing of doing weekly stage readings of my poetry before large audiences. Yet during my most sensitive times, simply riding in a car through ordinary urban traffic felt like running a gauntlet.

The worst part of being hypersensitive was that I didn't realize it was a temporary phase. I thought I'd have to live at this level of intense sensitivity from then on. This was a frightening idea; I couldn't conceive how I would be able to cope with the world (or how anyone else would long be able to cope with me) in this state. I imagined myself becoming a total recluse for the rest of my life. (Actually, some degree of residual hypersensitivity may be lasting. Swami Muktananda's eyes were so sensitive to light that he had to wear sunglasses much of the time throughout his life. Anne Armstrong, who became a gifted psychic and spiritual teacher after her fifteen year Kundalini awakening, says that more than thirty years later, she remains hypersensitive to sounds.) Although I no longer feel like an exposed nerve, I continue to be exceptionally sensitive, and I still need to protect myself as much as possible from abrasive situations. But I have also found that increased sensitivity is a great gift. I have a much stronger sense of which influences are nourishing or damaging to my own psyche. More wonderfully, being extraordinarily sensitive allows me deeper degrees of intimacy and rapport with other people and living things than I ever dreamed possible.

Lights

Speaking of the Kundalini, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda says, "When this force is awakened, countless suns and moons are awakened." Someone asked her if he should be visualizing light in his meditations. She replied, "It is not a matter of visualizing the white light; when the Kundalini is awakened, there is light, an inner explosion." Gopi Krishna said that the first symptom of his awakening was Inner Light: "It was not as if I was seeing the light or that I had an inner vision of light. Rather, it seemed as if a stream of liquid light was entering my brain. It has not disappeared during all these years..."

Literally and symbolically, light is the essence of spiritual awakening. "Among the trillion mysteries of the cosmos," wrote Yogananda, "the most phenomenal is light." He notes that Einstein's Theory of Relativity centered around the velocity of light. Yogananda marveled that in a universe in flux, Einstein mathematically proved "that the velocity of light is, so far as man's finite mind is concerned, the only constant... With a few strokes of his pen, Einstein banished from the universe every fixed reality except that of light." Likewise, when Kundalini erupts, light is one of the few fixed realities left unshattered.

During the most intense phase of my awakening, I was dazzled with a spectacular light show every time I closed my eyes. Even with my eyes opened, brilliant flashes of white or colored light appeared in my peripheral vision. These "external" lights were particularly vivid when I was in a darkened room. I went through another phase in which I saw a beautiful, shimmering rainbow whenever I shut my eyes. In *Energies of Transformation*, Bonnie Greenwell notes Aurobindo's theory that "the appearance of fire [and] lights (either in masses or in symbolic forms)... are commonly seen by most people who follow spiritual practices, and he believed they indicated the movement or action of inner forces." Most of the people I know who are undergoing Kundalini awakenings have mentioned seeing dazzling lights, internal and external. On occasion I see brief, sparkling lights dancing in front of me. Sometimes a vibrant blue pinpoint of light streaks past me -- perhaps what Swami Muktananda referred to as "the blue pearl."

Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield speaks of the visions of light experienced by advanced meditation students (in whom Kundalini has likely risen). Many, he says, "will see very powerful white lights as if looking into the headlight of an oncoming train or as if the whole sky were illumined by a brilliant sun." While different traditions and teachers ascribe various meanings to the appearance of different colored lights, Kornfield notes that most of them "agree that seeing colors is usually the effect of a deep and pure opening of consciousness."

At times, I've seen an aura of golden light radiating from my fingertips. Others see full auras around people and other living beings. Seeing auras or trails of light around living things and so-called inanimate objects are common Kundalini experiences. Some, like Gopi Krishna, see everything magically infused with light. The world may appear to be a transparent film through which blazes a brilliant light as if from a huge shining sun. Various shapes and colors of light may be seen beaming from specific chakra sites, or from all the Chakras. Some of these lights are visible to others as well. Subtle halo lights may appear around awakened individuals, and some people with risen Kundalini have been described as "glowing" by their friends.

Lights are often perceived in the presence of spirit guides or during divine visitations. A woman who was awakened in the middle of the night by the presence of Christ said her whole room lit up and she was filled with ecstasy. She has also seen spirits (some witnessed by others as well) who appear as luminous forms. Those undergoing psychospiritual processes, including near death experiences frequently report seeing beings of light. Extreme transformational experiences of any kind can be accompanied by astonishing lights. Those who have witnessed deaths of loved ones sometimes report a sudden increase in illumination in the room at the moment of death. And when a spiritual master dies, there are often dramatic atmospheric lights witnessed by everyone in the area. At stages in the process, overwhelming or unbearable light may drown everything else, disintegrating the personality. Krishnamurti felt as if he were staring straight into a blazing desert sun with his eyelids cut off. W. Brugh Joy, a physician and spiritual teacher, told of a "superbrilliant light" in which he was held captive for six hours straight. These same phenomena may have been manifest in the story of the sudden conversion of St. Paul, in which "there shined round him a light from heaven" which knocked him prostrate and revealed to him the truth of Christ (Acts 9:3-6). Such experiences reveal to us that, as Kornfield has said, "on one level the mind and body and the whole of consciousness is made of light itself." Holger Kalweit, who has made a global study of shamanism, has noted the universality of mystical experiences of light. In his book *Dreamtime Inner Space*, he devotes an entire chapter to this subject, concluding that "Figures of light and mystical phenomena of light cannot simply be written off as hallucinations or the result of an overexcitation of the nervous system. Spiritual experiences of light occur after the collapse of the ego structure, after rigorous spiritual practices, intense concentration, and meditation. They are supreme phenomena of deconditioning."

For those of us who have had these experiences, words and phrases such as "enlightenment", "illuminating" and "I saw the light" are no longer merely poetic or symbolic. Literally as well as figuratively, the light is dawning upon us. These visions aren't the climactic finale of our spiritual evolution. They are part of our amazing initiation into higher consciousness. Even if dark passages still lay ahead, the memory of the brightness cannot be destroyed. We have been brushed by the shining wings of the numinous. The blessing of knowing we are in, of and with the light lives with us always.

Strange Vibrations

Those undergoing Kundalini awakenings sometimes notice that they seem to acquire a subtle radiance that acts as a magnet. Strangers are unusually drawn to them. People seem to want to bask in this spiritual energy, even if they cannot consciously detect it. This phenomena is most evident in the charismatic quality of gurus and spiritual teachers who are vehicles for vast energy. Others feel uplifted and euphoric in their company.

Paradoxically, these very same "good" vibrations are experienced negatively by certain people. Their own personal energy fields are quickened in the vicinity of the one who is awakening, but this quickening brings up fear instead of tranquillity. These are the people who seem to fly off the handle when they are in contact with us. They may come at us with irrational anger, criticism, judgment and demands. This perplexing polarization, where one is suddenly an object of both adoration and hostility from others, can be extremely difficult. Realizing that others' reactions have far less to do with us, than with what is moving through us (spiritual energy) can help us feel less personally wounded or inflated by these behaviors.

The heightened energy in our systems can effect our non-human contacts as well. Animals may react differently in our presence, being magnetized to us or bolting away from us. A woman going through this electrifying stage told me that her boyfriend got a shock every time he touched her, and her erstwhile mellow-tempered cat's hair stood on end and it bolted away from her whenever she entered the room. She said her hands emitted such static electricity that papers and other small objects on tables would skitter away from her when she reached for them!

I have discovered that plants respond to the active Kundalini also. I frequently sit to write or read in a room by a southern exposure window. There is a philodendron plant on the windowsill, right next to my chair. In all the years I have had this plant, the leaves always grew toward the light coming from the window. But in the winter of the fourth year of my Kundalini awakening, I noticed a most peculiar change. Some of the leaves began to pull away from the window and grow toward me instead. At first I could not believe this was happening, but I had to acknowledge it when they grew so far over that they were nearly pressing against my hair when I sat in my reading chair. I know that when houseplant leaves are not able to get their share of natural light, they reach for a substitute electric light source, but usually these "refugees" quickly turn yellow and die. But the leaves that were leaning in my direction remained very deep green and healthy, although there is very little winter sunlight in this room. This phenomena, which Charles also witnessed, stopped after several weeks... perhaps because its implications were a bit too much for me.

Shakti (the risen Kundalini) frequently interferes with household electricity. I know of several people who called in electricians to check all their home wiring (without finding defects) when this interference caused concern. Lights go dim or may flicker, or blink off and on in the vicinity of the awakening individual. I went through a period where I couldn't touch a light switch without the light bulb instantly burning out. Radio or TV channels may produce static in the presence of such a person. Electrical and mechanical appliances may break down far more frequently. One woman told me she had "burned out" four answering machines in a period of five weeks. There were times when my energy was so strong that if I simply walked into the

room where Charles was using the computer or printer, these machines would instantly malfunction. As soon as I left the room, they would operate perfectly again! At the peak of her awakening, a woman told us her Kundalini voltage was strong enough to register on a compass; another was able to light an incandescent bulb simply by holding it in her hands. Paranormal incidents are commonly reported. In my case, a television repeatedly turned itself on full blast in the middle of the night. Electrical appliances and battery-operated toys may turn on and off or malfunction like a supernatural calling card from unseen gremlins or a movie scene announcing the landing of a UFO. (As weird as these things are when they occur, they generally fall short of Hollywood's hair-raising histrionics.)

Objects may crack, move or fall in the presence of Shakti. I went through a phase where whatever room I was in would make creaking, popping and other random noises for no apparent reason. One afternoon, I felt a sudden wild and emphatic throbbing in my spine. "Now what?" I thought, hoping this wasn't signaling some new physical disaster. After about 30 seconds, all this commotion in my spine stopped. I happened to turn on the TV and catch a news broadcast some while later, and it turned out that at the exact time I was feeling the throbbing in my spine, a moderate sized earthquake had struck in the region just east of us.

Vicki Noble had a similar synchronistic bodily manifestation as mine; a large boil developed on her back that she experienced as "a volcano needing to erupt." The day after she made this comment to her partner, "Mount St. Helens did erupt, and so did my boil!" When the Kundalini has sufficiently sensitized us, we discover, as Noble did, that we are one with the earth. And more than we realize, we are one with each other. I awoke the morning of April 19, 1995 feeling as if my body was full of shrapnel: I hurt all over. Later, I heard from others with awakened Kundalini who had similar stories. They had felt terrible on this day; some felt "irrationally" angry or sad; others felt as if they were suffocating, buried alive or psychically exploding. Our sudden painful symptoms and reactions did not make sense to us until we became aware of the Oklahoma bombing which occurred on this day.

Carl Jung, who underwent several years of profound spiritual emergence, also experienced extraordinary phenomena. Once, a series of uncanny phenomena occurred in his home, witnessed by family members. He said "it was as if my house began to be haunted. My eldest daughter saw a white figure passing through the room. My second daughter, independently of her elder sister, related that twice in the night her blanket had been snatched away." Later in the day, his "front door bell began ringing frantically," although no one was at the door. All these poltergeist-type activities stopped when Jung channeled his now famous mystical work, "The Seven Sermons of the Dead." Through our bodies and minds, we are receiving stations for inconceivably powerful forces and vast information about ourselves and our world. Although spirits may be involved in the production of some of these phenomena, these paranormal events seem more likely to happen in the presence of a person with a great deal of Shakti. Instead of regarding any of these phenomena as supernatural and frightening, I interpret them as signs of Lila, the majestic play of God. When the Shakti is strong in us, we are privy to more mysterious forms of this cosmic playfulness and interconnectedness. Sometimes, the phenomena also seem to be asking us to be more receptive, or to allow spiritual messages to come through, as in Jung's case. At other times, these things seem to be simply an awakening call -- a startling "Hello! I'm right here with you!" from an unexpected voice of the Universe.

Chapter 8

SECRET LANGUAGE

"The universe is full of signs... The shape of clouds, the way birds fly, the sounds of nature, an unexpected meeting -- all these transmit a message that expresses the will of the gods. The universe is a whole that fits together logically and that maintains itself and develops in a meaningful way."

--Maria-Jose, Brazilian Macumba priestess

The risen Kundalini announces itself in veiled or blatant symbolic and synchronistic messages. A woman who had no idea her various ailments signified anything beyond poor health one day felt an inexplicable urge to pick up her young daughter's crayons and draw. This was something she had not done since childhood herself. To her amazement, a picture, which included a dancing woman, seemed to automatically emerge from the crayon. The title for the picture also wrote itself: "I am dancing in the arms of the Great Mother." At the time, this person knew nothing about Kundalini illness or the connection between Kundalini and the Mother Goddess.

Another woman who was reading through the list of common Kundalini symptoms posted on our Shared Transformation Web site had been experiencing many of the symptoms but doubted they were attributable to Kundalini. But as soon as she had read through the listed symptoms, she had a sudden urge to read her horoscope. Uncannily, her horoscope stated: "Let the Kundalini rise; the serpent has been waiting a long time."

Synchronicities and serendipitous events challenge the random and mechanistic world view of Western culture; they point to a vital coherence and interdependence between all life. Vicki Noble describes this underlying interrelatedness as "a web that connects each of us with everything that is." She points out that a number of world creation myths describe the World Mother as a centrally positioned cosmic spider spinning forth the universe: "In the same way that a spider's web is infinitely sensitive to vibration, and the smallest movement is felt reverberating over the entire web, so are all actions and reactions felt by everyone contained in the web of life. There is nothing that happens anywhere on the planet (or in the galaxy, for that matter) that does not affect each one of us and that we do not feel on some level of our being."

As our consciousness expands, awareness of our interconnection with all creation exponentially increases. This in turn enlivens and liberates us, because, as the spiritual teacher Michael J. Eastcott points out: "Expansion ever relates to something greater, and this has an elevating, exalting, joyous effect. We are released from the tighter bonds that held us down in our smaller perspectives, we have gained a wider freedom, can range in new fields. It is stimulating to all our bodies -- mental, emotional, and physical."

Kundalini not only breaks down "barriers between the various layers and states of consciousness," as Arundale has written. It also enables a profound experience of unity by breaking down barriers "between the individual himself and the larger Self..." Meaningful coincidences and seemingly magical events weave us into the great web of life, blurring old consensual-reality boundaries. We become aware of an awesome intelligence, which operates

both within and beyond us, which is not mute but speaks a special language, which previously we did not understand.

Synchronicities occur with greater frequency as we realize our oneness with the universe. A really interesting phenomena is what author Alan Vaughan calls the "Synchronicity of Synchronicity," in which interest in or attention to meaningful coincidences seems to increase their number! Neuropsychologist Paul Pearsall has witnessed this phenomena first hand: "Whenever I speak about the meaning of coincidences, more and more coincidences seem to occur for me and for those around me."

The term "Synchronicity" was coined by Carl Jung, who was acutely aware of the importance of such coincidences in his own and his patients' lives. Marie-Louise von Franz, who worked closely with Jung for 30 years, observed an amazing phenomenon: the older he became, the more constantly synchronicities occurred in his life. They often happened when Jung needed information for something he was working on. Research materials, says von Franz, "simply ran after him." For example, "Once when he was occupied with a specific problem, a general practitioner in Australia sent him the complete material which he could use, and it arrived by mail just at the very time he said: 'Now I ought to have some observations on that kind of thing.' It was as if even the collective unconscious of Australia was cooperating!"

Most of us have at times experienced synchronicities, which startle us. Once when I decided to call a friend I hadn't spoken with for quite awhile, I picked up the phone, but oddly, there was no dial tone. To my surprise, a voice on the line said tentatively, "Hello?" It was the friend I was going to call! She had dialed my number, but I had "answered" the phone before it rang. Synchronicities can be expressions of psychic attunement between individuals, or they can be messages from the Spirit. Sometimes these meaningful coincidences are very beautiful. On our wedding day, Charles had placed our rings side by side together in a small box. Right before our marriage ceremony, he opened the box to take out the rings and was amazed to see that the rings themselves had "united" -- they had fallen together, with mine nestled inside of his. (We took this to be a very good omen for our marriage, and it has proven true.)

Of course, the meaning of synchronicities, like everything else, is in the eye (or mind) of the beholder. Arnold Mindell describes an incident early in his psychotherapy practice with his first schizophrenic patient. The man was grinning "in a wild and ecstatic condition" and Mindell says he felt terrified. The man proclaimed to him, "I am Lucifer, the bringer and destroyer of light." Mindell took this as evidence that the man was crazy. "I do not remember if I told him what I thought," said Mindell, "but he looked me straight in the eye and said, 'And since you do not believe me, watch what I can do now.' Mindell says that "At that moment, the lights in my house went out. The fuses had not blown." At this point, Mindell could have had any of several reactions. He could have refused to acknowledge the relevancy of what had just happened, which is a common defense mechanism of denial in the face of unwelcome information. Or he could have become horrified and decided his patient was indeed possessed by the devil. Instead, he was immediately humbled. "Call it chance, synchronicity or anything you like," he says, "but it cured my inflation of thinking that I was real and sane and he was just crazy."

Many such synchronicities seem to be teaching devices. In what psychology calls "projection,"

our internal and external realities can be mirrors of each other. For instance, those who are extremely self-critical may find that critical, nitpicking people dominate their lives. Or it may work inversely: those who try to be superhumanly selfless, repressing their own needs, may be smothered by needy and selfish people. In this case, the self-centeredness of people surrounding us reflects our need to take care of ourselves more.

Years ago, after reading a book on metaphysics, I was wondering if hostile and fearful thoughts could magnetically draw negative external experiences. Walking barefoot across my bedroom, I suddenly stepped on an unseen thumbtack on the floor. I burst out laughing (hardly feeling the sting in my foot) as I realized the universe had answered me affirmatively with a synchronistic pun: I'd been attacked by a tack! (This taught me two things: whatever the mind is focused upon can bring about analogous situations, and the Universe has a wild sense of humor.)

Synchronicities are most often experienced during crisis or crucial periods of life -- during accidents, illness, or around births, deaths, career changes, weddings, or other significant transitions. The shaman Gloria Feman Orenstein marvels at the fact that she was born on International Women's Day (March 8th) and grew up to be a professor of women's studies. Her experiences have taught her that "the most ordinary occurrences in our everyday lives, in what we mistakenly think of as nonsacred reality, are really signposts on a path whose underlying pattern has been set in motion with our birth, or more likely perhaps, even before our physical birth into this dimension." Looking back at the synchronistic signs, symbols, and omens of her life has convinced her of the genuine sacredness of worldly reality.

Rediscovering Our Shamanic Nature

"We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity." -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

To those of us raised on the premise that everything is separate and unrelated to everything else, synchronicities seem extraordinary or outright supernatural. But to our ancient ancestors (and to indigenous peoples still alive today), not only are synchronicities natural and ordinary -- they are indispensable guideposts for daily life. No shaman would consider carrying out an activity without getting an agreement from the spirits, most often through a synchronistic event. This dependence on Spirit guidance rather than the rote routines of the modern world earned tribal people an undeserved reputation for being lazy and unreliable. Rather than living by the clock, these people waited for a sign to know when it was the right time to perform a task.

Shamanic people have looked with horror at the lives of those in "civilized" nations. They are stunned by our ignorance of the voice of the Spirit and the cycles of nature, both of which speak through the primordial language of synchronicity. Where, they ask, is the soul of such a mechanical and ruthlessly rushed people? Actions taken without consulting the Spirit are considered very dangerous, not only to the individual who dares to do this, but to the entire community as well. Much of our current predicament of global conflict and ecological disaster stems from our refusal or our inability to watch for signs and to act in humility and reverence to the greater Whole.

Those of us whose lives are increasingly guided by signs and synchronicities are relearning the truths of the ancient ways. The more we get into the flow of our own authenticity, as Marion Woodman has remarked, the more we become aware of synchronistic events: "... you begin to realize that the outer and the inner are in fact the same. And the balance is when these two come together. What you thought was outside is part of your inner life."

The nonlocal ideation of the self is no longer solely the domain of mysticism. Physicists like Erwin Schrodinger have reached the same conclusion: "The localization of the personality, of the conscious mind, inside the body is only symbolic, just an aid for practical use." Synchronicities demonstrate interconnections and cohesive forces that operate quite differently than our chopped up, time/space barrier-view of reality allows. When we fully move into synchronistic perception, we realize that there is nothing in our experience that is not in some way relevant to us. We reconnect to what Arnold Mindell calls "our native mind, our Shamanic heart," and through this ancient remembering, realize that everything on earth is also part of our personal process. Says Mindell: "In your natural mind, there are no mysterious connections or synchronicities. There is no wilderness. Everything is part of you. Neither is the world statistical. The indigenous paradigm does not split psyche from matter, inner from outer. Like the Yogi who discovers that he is, in fact, the Atman, or the whole world, the native person lives as if the world were her partner and herself."

Signs & Symbols

"The whole world is a book of symbols insofar as physical things naturally reflect those of a higher plane. We do not have to make symbols, only to recognize them; and they are there whether we recognize them or not." -- Arthur Osborne

Readers of Shared Transformation newsletter may recall an image of a Black Panther leaping across a galactic scene in the introductory issue. Twenty years ago, when I drew this, I had no conscious idea what it symbolized. When I selected it from the portfolio of my old artwork to illustrate the "Fire and Snakes" article (later in this chapter), my logical mind balked. What did a panther lunging through space have to do with snakes or fires? I rationalized that it portrayed powerful and unpredictable forces of nature, which did pertain to the Kundalini energies... and besides, I liked the drawing.

Years later, I was amazed to come across the phrase "Leaping fearlessly into the Void of the Unknown" describing the "medicine" (i.e., the symbolic power) of the panther. This was from the book *The 13 Original Clan Mothers* by Jamie Sams, and could have been used as a caption for my picture!

Several weeks later, Charles brought home a nature-symbol reference book called *Animal-Speak* by Ted Andrews. I was even more stunned to read his researched symbolism for the Black Panther, which can "reflect an awakening of the Kundalini!" Moreover, "the panther often signals a time of rebirth after a period of suffering and death on some level" and represents "a time of moving from mere poles of existence to new life without poles or barriers." Andrews goes on to say that "the panther is a symbol of awakening to the heroic quest," and "that no matter the depth of degradation -- whether self-inflicted or from outside forces -- there is always

the promise of light and love to lead us back."

After reading all this, I realized I couldn't have picked a more apt illustration for the article! Although I had been innocent of what I was communicating to myself at the time I had drawn the picture, in retrospect, I realized it had been among the many encoded signs and messages I had been receiving or inadvertently broadcasting throughout my life, spelling out my own destiny. Some part of me, or something channeling through me, had been dropping clues and hints that I was not able (or ready) to understand.

Some of these symbols I had understood perfectly without realizing it. In the March/April '93 issue of Shared Transformation, I chose to illustrate an article called "Following the River" with a picture of a turtle swimming in the crests of an ocean wave. Again, as with the panther illustration, my logical mind had told me this picture was not really of a river, and therefore not completely appropriate. One of the last lines I wrote for the article was "When I stop trying to push the river, whatever is meant to be comes easily, effortlessly." In late 1994, I bought the Medicine Cards created by Jamie Sams and David Carson. When I looked up the meaning of the turtle, I was elated to discover that one of the meanings of this animal, due to its slow, plodding pace, is a warning "of the dangers of pushing the river."

It is apparent to me now that especially through my poetry and artwork, my soul had been declaring its commitment to transformation throughout my life. I did not fathom this at the time I composed these works, nor did I suspect how deep and consummate a spiritual current ran through me even then. To the contrary, I imagined myself immersed in creativity rather than spirituality. This was before I understood that inspired art and spirituality are one in the same! All ancient cultures knew this, which is why they made no distinction between art and sacrament.

I knew that my creative inspiration rose from a mysterious inner fount, expressing a passion and boldness that sometimes took me by surprise. For instance, the seemingly self-obsessed, drumroll declaration of a soul-mission poem I wrote in 1982 was enigmatic to me then, but glaringly obvious now:

This is dynamite.
This is dynamite wired to my heart --
I just need a match;
I just need a light.
This is nitroglycerin.
This is nitroglycerin stashed inside my brain.
I just need something to shake me.
I just need something to set me off.
This is high explosives!
This is beware/danger!
Everybody stand back!
There's a bomb on this plane.
This flight could last forever.
This could be the countdown.

This could be the blast-off.
I am a missile designed for eternal flight.
I am ready to blow.
Everybody stand back
or I might just take you with me.

That untitled, cryptic warning could have been dubbed "Prelude to a Violent Kundalini Awakening." Nine years later, in a far more subdued and somber mood, the following poem was, in retrospect, a notice to myself that "blast-off" was imminent:

Something in me wants to move.
There is somewhere much more real than this
and I must go.
The mundane is too brittle and endlessly grey.
I've been here long enough.
Something in me wants to leap beyond the pale.
Something in me crouched in waiting
wants to move.
The walls have grown thin and blurry now.
Everything is old and atrophied
except for something in me
that wants so very much
to move.

Within a few months of writing this poem, something sure did move -- Kundalini blew me wide open! The depressed tone of my later poem reflects a common pattern: before their Kundalini awakenings, many people have told me their physical and/or psychological vitality had drastically declined. Several had premonitions of impending death. A sense of utter depletion signals that some kind of radical turning point is approaching. (This is not a universal motif, however. Some people's lives were very satisfying immediately preceding the eruption of their Kundalini. In one such case I am aware of, the individual has had a more turmoil-filled process than mine, so it would seem that one's prior degree of self-contentment has little bearing on the course of one's awakening.)

As transformation intensifies, all sorts of archetypal and symbolic material comes up with it. Some of it we receive with an instantaneous "eureka!" of recognition -- we simply know what it means. Other things remain perplexing or barely noticed until we are led to discover their significance. As in the case with my panther drawing, understanding may not occur until many years later. But I have found that often it can come more quickly if we earnestly seek for understanding. Once I realized that the figures appearing to me in visions and dreams had multileveled importance, I became very interested in these messages. Soon -- sometimes within a matter of hours -- I would find my interpretive answers.

The signs and symbols that are most significant are the ones that come to us unbidden. Yet for

this reason, they are the ones we are most likely to ignore or reject. This is particularly true with some of the bizarre images and mystical episodes that occur to us during spiritual awakening. During the most eventful period of my Kundalini process, I had many strange experiences, but the only one I strongly fought against -- and managed to abort -- was when I spontaneously felt myself turning into a tiger. This sensation was so overpowering I seriously feared I would lose my human reasoning abilities and take on the feral instincts of a tiger. What was most immediately alarming to me at the time was that this tiger-self might harm our pet birds or rabbit. My need to protect our pets gave me the willpower to fight off the possessing tiger spirit.

Later I learned that it is not uncommon for those with an awakening Kundalini to feel themselves morphed into powerful astral animals like bears, wolves, lions... or tigers. But it was not until I was studying shamanism several years later that I more fully understood this phenomena, which is called "shape-shifting." Especially for those of us who have a Shamanic calling, helper spirits often come to us in the guise of animals. This can be in meditation, in dreams, or through a paranormal or ordinary world experience.

I learned that far from being threatening (or proving me insane), my tiger had been a wholly benevolent protector spirit. In Tibetan lore, the tiger is the guardian of the Gates of Knowledge, and in India, the tiger is sacred to Kali. In the past, a Guru sometimes gave his advanced disciples a tiger skin on which to meditate and sleep for spiritual empowerment.

Too late, I realized it had been a mistake to reject this spirit ally. Such a powerful guardian protects one from all negative influences, including illness and injury. And the way in which it made this spontaneous appearance, by merging itself with me, was, I now know, a great honor. I still suspect I might never had suffered my severe back injury had I the wisdom to accept my tiger spirit when it first chose to reveal itself to me. (Several years later I discovered the tiger spirit had not altogether deserted me. In both Charles' and my dreams, it sporadically reappears.)

Gifts and opportunities can be lost to us if we do not understand their symbolic meanings. It is important to recognize that a symbol may have an archetypal meaning beyond our personal associations to it. At the time the tiger manifested through me, I knew nothing of this Shamanic phenomena and my limited personal knowledge of tigers told me that this was a dangerous predator -- possibly a demonic intrusion from the astral plane. Because I did not know its archetypal and spiritual significance, I could not receive what was being offered to me.

Our misinterpretation can make us afraid of things which are actually very positive, just as our well-intentioned friends can scare or mislead us through the same limited understanding. A woman who dreamed of a bear was told that this was a bad omen, symbolizing ferocity and aggression. (This definition had come from a book of general symbology.) Yet to Native Americans and other peoples worldwide, the bear spirit has long been recognized as the guardian of the most powerful healers. The woman who had this dream was developing a healer's ability with her awakened Kundalini. In her dream, the bear had turned into a cloud, as if to let her know it was a spirit bear.

Bradford Keeney, who often had visions of Jesus, was bewildered during one of these visions when the image of Jesus transformed into an eagle and began flying through fire. This greatly

disturbed him until weeks later, when he learned that the eagle was an early figure for depicting Christ and that "ancient peoples saw the eagle as a carrier of light and fire and that the symbolism of Christ as light and fire was part of ancient Christian understanding."

On a more subtle level, symbolic acts and ideas seem to quietly surface throughout the awakening process. (Or more accurately, our awakening consciousness makes us more aware of these symbols, which are ever-present in everyone's life.) When the energy was so intense that I could neither remain still enough to rest or meditate, nor focus on any physically or mentally demanding activity, I spent long hours doing needlepoint and embroidery. Another woman going through a powerful six year Kundalini awakening told me that she also found needlework a "grounding" pastime. Long afterwards, I came across this astonishingly apropos passage by Walt Anderson: "The symbolism of thread, of weaving, turns up again and again in the Eastern spiritual disciplines... The weaving of thread is a metaphor for the deep interconnectedness of all life in a bewilderingly multifaceted cosmos."

Once while sitting indoors talking with Charles, I was awed to see a black bird materialize from nowhere, flash around the room at ceiling level, then vanish. It appeared very real, but I knew it was a spirit-bird because Charles had not witnessed it and because of the magical way it had shot out of thin air. I did not know what kind of bird it was; it appeared too small to be a raven or crow. Due to its dark coloration, I was a little worried about what it might signify. This was during the time when I was still having a lot of spine pain, and I had been fervently praying for spirit help and healing.

When I tried to find the bird in a wildlife reference book, I came across a picture that looked just like it -- a purple martin. But I still had no idea what it could mean. It was not until weeks later, when Charles brought home the book *Animal-Speak* that I had my answer. According to Andrews, the purple martin is a blessed omen. When it appears, he says to "look for a positive change in your fortune. It is a bird that brings peaceful living energies with it." The purple martin's deep hue is associated with the divine; this, says Andrews, "and its aerial ability have caused it to be called God's bow and arrow." I took this to be an omen of healing, and it did seem that from the night of this "vision," my back and my life in general began improving.

The images that appear to us through visions, dreams, and daily life experiences are part of what anthropologist Angeles Arrien calls our "psychomythology." These visual or other strong impressions are "often our psyche's way of showing us what is important about our nature," and can provide us with guidance. "The psyche is relentless about using every possible symbol, feeling, sensation, or memory," says Arrien, "to let us know where we are in our journey -- physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually."

Plants, stones and other natural elements have symbolic meanings, as do colors, numbers... and really, everything imaginable. "The whole world is a book of symbols insofar as physical things naturally reflect those of a higher plane," wrote Ramana Maharshi's disciple, Arthur Osborne. "We do not have to make symbols, only to recognize them; and they are there whether we recognize them or not." People who become adept at reading symbolic meanings can achieve a level of awareness that matches or surpasses that of gifted psychics. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, most psychics have an intuitive or acquired understanding of

symbols. The clairvoyant medium Eileen Garrett was well acquainted with symbols, and said that certain symbols reoccurred during her life, providing infallible guidance. One of these was a vision of a "rosy three-petaled figure -- a true flower of the psyche" which would appear to her to let her know she would be successful when she did healings. Another inwardly perceived symbol was in the form of a spearhead: "It dances before me when I am to be approached to start some new endeavor."

Whispers to the Heart

"In the world of physics we watch a shadowgraph performance of the drama of familiar life," wrote Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington. He elaborates: "The shadow of my elbow rests on the shadow table as the shadow ink flows over the shadow paper. It is all symbolic, and as a symbol the physicist leaves it. Then comes the alchemist Mind who transmutes the symbols... To put the conclusion crudely, the stuff of the world is mind-stuff."

This was equally evident to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, in his essay on "Language," proclaimed, "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." To Emerson, there was no doubt about it: "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind."

As already mentioned, nature-revering cultures have understood the universe in this way for eons. As the Native American author Paula Gunn Allen observes, "What modern people call material or physical reality is a symbol or reflection of the real." The Lakota shaman Lame Deer articulates the Native American view: "We Sioux spend a lot of time thinking about everyday things which in our mind are mixed up with the spiritual. We see in the world around us many symbols that teach us the meaning of life... We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one. To us [symbols] are part of nature, part of ourselves, even little insects like ants and grasshoppers. We try to understand them not with the head but with the heart, and we need no more than a hint to give us the meaning."

It takes courage as well as attention to read the symbols all around us. The greater our awareness, the more we perceive both the glory and harshness of life. It is impossible to screen out one without losing our appreciation of the other. When we are open to symbolic language, pivotal and significant events are announced to us in advance. In what I now know was a subconscious farewell message, a friend sent me an unusual Christmas card with a picture of a woman holding open a basket to release a white bird into the sky. Inside the card, my friend said he did not know what this card had to do with Christmas, but the picture was compelling to him. Two months later, he died suddenly of a stroke.

Brugh Joy mentioned a similar omen in his own life. In his case, it took the form of an actual event, when someone close to him was nearing death. Always late at night, a bird would appear flapping and pecking in a strange manner against his window pane, then soar off into the darkness. Within two days, a death would follow. Of course, as Joy warns, "not every external event will be predictive, and an observer must discriminate between fantasy and actual psychic information."

While symbolic information is more evident in the emotionally charged atmosphere surrounding momentous events, the ordinary issues of our lives are symbolically represented as well. "We must explore more fully the subtleties of relationship, for even casual encounters are significant," says Tai Chi instructor Maria Parisen: "In a living Cosmos, communion is sacred dialogue. Every meeting, even with what appears inert, is with a living presence. Through the soul of things, we envision and are beheld by divine Being. We commune with angels every day, in the most mundane as well as momentous events."

Most people have become familiar with the Native American ritual of the Vision Quest -- in its traditional form, an arduous supplication for spiritual guidance and the discovery of one's life mission. But it is not necessary to embark on such a difficult quest to be given answers to daily issues. When I have a question regarding things that are happening in my life, I simply notice the first thing that catches my attention when I go outdoors. This method yields remarkable results for me. The sounds, sights, the particular activities of animals or people in the vicinity, or anything else that is particularly striking in our encounters with the world are symbolically speaking to us, and such messages become more frequent and decipherable when we begin to take them seriously.

Symbol interpretation engages both hemispheres of the brain, bridging image to idea, sensory detail to conceptual pattern. Westerners need to watch for a tendency to over-intellectualize, without grounding their interpretation of symbols to experiential facts. Just as feeling alone cannot arrive at insight, head-tripping cut off from heart and gut impressions seriously distorts our understanding of things. Forcing symbols to fit into pre-existing theories usually sacrifices truth for the sake of elaborate configurations of meaning. To Freud, for instance, anything that was longer than it was wide was a phallic symbol, in keeping with his belief that sex was the prime motivator for all human endeavors. Then came Jung, with his genius for translating dream language, yet he also occasionally drifted off on cerebral tangents. Later in his life, Jung declared that he was not himself a Jungian and was dismayed that many of his followers were applying his ideas as gospel rather than using them as springboards for making their own discoveries.

Of course, it is as possible to misuse or misapply symbolic information as anything else. I once knew an extremely narcissistic man who would spy on his girlfriend, interpreting everything he saw her do as relevant only to himself. He drove others crazy with his attempts to involve them in this paranoid pursuit, asking things like "When she changed her shoes, do you think it meant she was getting ready to leave me?"

Two mistakes we can make in terms of understanding symbols is to give up too easily or to frustrate and punish ourselves by trying too hard. At the age of nine, the Lakota holy man, Black Elk, had a monumental spiritual vision that took him the remainder of his life to comprehend. Bit by bit, as the years passed, so also did more of the truth of his vision come to pass in the outer world. But because it was such a great vision -- for the restoration of harmony, health and well-being to his people and to all the beings of the earth -- he did not live long enough to see it become fulfilled. Believing he had failed his mission, this great man died broken hearted.

His story makes me suspect that some -- perhaps all -- of us are here to serve in a part of a vision or Divine Plan that is so tremendous, it will pass on to many generations after us. We are

carrying -- or being carried by -- forces that evolve us at the same time they are transforming the whole of the planet. Without a perspective on this, we may get swept into personal grandiosity or, like Black Elk, suffer self-reproach before the immensity of such tasks.

In this as with all else, we need to be patient and kind to ourselves. So much of the transformational experience is new to us, and so beyond the confines of conventional thinking, that often we are left scrambling in the dark. Understanding symbolic messages rarely comes easily, at least not until we become accustomed to "reading" things in this way. But the more I realize I am being "spoken to" by everything I experience, the more eager I am to learn about the archetypal and symbolic meaning of everything I encounter. I have also learned to allow myself a "don't know" attitude toward many things. At another time in my life, I was afraid to do this; afraid of being stupid, and unwilling to be vulnerable to things I didn't fully comprehend. But rushing to categorize and explain everything can foster a much worse kind of "stupidity": without openness to the unknown, learning is impossible.

I have come to prefer being a student of the mysteries than a professor of the facts. In the West, we imagine that the Zen Roshi who advises the initiate to cultivate a "beginner's mind" has, himself, progressed to a far wiser "Master's mind." This is not so. The "beginner's mind" isn't simply a requisite for embarking on a path toward fuller awareness; it is the condition of receptivity that sustains continuous spiritual growth. Uncertainty, far from being a state of confusion, is a signpost of mental flexibility. The "beginner's mind," an unadorned humility in the face of the infinite, is the Master's mind.

Fire & Snakes

The serpent and fire are both archetypal symbols for the risen Kundalini. Both of these symbols have multiple meanings. Among other things, fire signifies purification and spiritual energy.

It appears in sacred literature from Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush to the Rig Veda's statement: "Universal Order and Truth were born of blazing Tapas." The Greek myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods to give it to mankind, may have a deeper esoteric meaning -- a symbolic reference to Kundalini fire, which brings humans to cosmic consciousness.

In her analysis of Teilhard de Chardin's work, religious scholar Beatrice Bruteau says that Teilhard often refers to primal, universal energy as expressions of divine presence or Fire: "It is 'the devouring fire... [Identified] with the Divine' and pointed out by science in the form of the various energies of the world, from nuclear fusion in the stars, to life, to soul. In all these ways, 'See, the universe is ablaze!' he cries. Fire is, for Teilhard, the archetypal energy; it represents the ultimate energy of which all other energies are special manifestations... Everything is illumined and animated from within by this divine Fire. God is in the world as 'a universal transparency aglow with fire.'"

In what sounds suspiciously like a description of the awakened Kundalini, Bruteau continues: "For we ourselves are now the fuel of this living flame... We must open our arms to 'call down and welcome the Fire.' It is not enough to contemplate this 'super-substantial, personal Fire'

which solicitously preserves what it consumes. We must resolutely give ourselves to it as food."

The other main symbol of Kundalini, the serpent or snake, represents primordial energy, great mysteries, cosmic forces, and, by virtue of shedding its skin, rebirth. To the Australian aborigines, a spirit snake is believed to be the female creator of the world and represents a growth and vitality principle. This definition would apply equally to Kundalini.

The snake appears in the spiritual literature and religious art of nearly every culture on earth. In some portrayals, it has an evil connotation, standing for unregenerate or unconscious impulses. In Egyptian and other lore, even such a sinister snake represents the potential for good. The snake, which has been conquered, corresponds to forces, which have been mastered, harnessed and rechanneled for the benefit of the psyche and humanity. Even so, Joseph Campbell maintained that "the usual mythological association of the serpent is not, as in the Bible, with corruption, but with physical and spiritual health." He writes: "In America, a feathered serpent god was recognized as symbolic of the power that casts off death to be resurrected."

Many of the Kundalini sensations echo the fire and snake motif. Undulating energies are felt throughout the body. The physical shaking and vibrating experiences have a serpentine quality. In fact, the spiritual teacher Dr. R.P. Kaushik has said that Kundalini is called serpent energy precisely because Kundalini energy always moves in waves. When the Kundalini is active, the hands, arms, head and entire body often move in involuntary sinuous, snakelike motions. Those with an active Kundalini often describe sensations in their spines that feel like little snakes or an electric worm wriggling its way up the back. And intense heat is a common feature of Kundalini. This may occur in localized areas of the body, or come as hot flash episodes. Sometimes this heat is so fierce it feels as if one is about to burst into flames.

As I mentioned earlier, at the crux of my painful illness (but weeks before I realized I was involved in a Kundalini awakening), I awoke one night in a burning angst, with every muscle from the soles of my feet to the top of my scalp writhing, wrenching and spasming. I cried out to Charles, wailing that my body felt like "Burning snakes!" Several weeks later I was to have another extraordinary snake-experience. Thankfully, this one entailed no pain, only pressure in the crown of my head. I had the peculiar sensation that my skull had become oblong and egg-shaped, and that something alive was trying to hatch out from it. I somehow knew that this "hatching egg" was a metaphoric enactment. Then, the hatchling broke free and wriggled down to my forehead. I was in quite an altered state at the time, and was awed to recognize that the creature born from my egg-skull was a baby snake! Strangely, although the sensations from this were quite convincing, I was not repulsed in the least. To the contrary, I felt sudden, inexplicable joy. (It was not until some time later that the Kundalini symbolism became apparent to me.)

Another woman with an active Kundalini had a very similar experience. She spoke of it as a light which wrapped around the top of her head and shone down over the front of her face in a way that reminded her of the Egyptian serpent on the headdress of the pharaohs.

Those undergoing transformation often dream of snakes or fires. When the Kundalini is active or is about ready to rise, people often have dreams of being bitten by a snake or of snakes entering their bodies. In one case, a twenty-year-old man who had been unable to get medical help for his

slew of perplexing symptoms had a vivid dream in which a large snake spoke to him. Because he knew nothing of Kundalini symbols or symptoms, it was not until he recounted this dream to some friends that someone finally made the connection. I also know of a woman undergoing a relatively mild Kundalini awakening who specifically asked for a dream to help her understand what was causing her illness. At the time, she didn't suspect it was anything but a physical problem. In her dream, a doctor showed her a little "worm" coiled in his hand. Interestingly, Joseph Campbell spoke of the Kundalini as a tiny snake, about the size of a hair.

In my experience, and in that of many other people, the fire and snake also appear in quite literal fashion during Kundalini awakenings. In his autobiographical book, *Play of Consciousness*, Muktananda mentions that snakes are often present during Kundalini awakenings. In his own case, a cobra lurked nearby (yet never harmed him) during the intense phase of his process.

Six months into my awakening, a new neighbor on the block was visiting next door. I looked out across the yard to see him showing off his pet -- a twelve-foot long python! One man in a Kundalini process came home from an afternoon walk to find a large black snake sprawled at the foot of his apartment door. He lived in an urban area, and the snake was inside a locked entry hall! Another woman kept inadvertently tuning into radio and TV programs about snakes at the early stage of her Kundalini awakening.

Fires seem to break out in the vicinity of the one with the awakening Kundalini. Usually, these combustion's occur as natural accidents. Several people in the throes of Kundalini awakenings have reported kitchen fires, which they attributed to their own "spacing out" while cooking. One woman undergoing an awakening found her bed on fire when a lit candle fell from the nightstand. Another "barbecued" her house when she left a bag of what she thought were cold fireplace ashes behind her house. The wind fanned sparks and set the back of the house ablaze.

The week my Kundalini arose, my husband and I were startled in the middle of night by explosive sounds. The house next door (fortunately unoccupied at the time) was a flaming inferno. It burned almost to the ground before firefighters were able to extinguish the blaze. In the fourth month of my Kundalini awakening, I had a particularly vivid dream in which the whole city was burning. In the dream, the conflagration was a natural disaster called a "fire storm". The next day, recalling the dream, I thought it had been merely symbolic. I had never heard of a "fire storm" except in war devastation. Two months later, a cataclysmic firestorm (as the media called it) raged through Oakland, where I live, destroying 3000 homes.

I have never heard of anyone undergoing a Kundalini awakening who was seriously hurt by either a snake or a fire, though a few have been injured. Yet I would not underestimate the dangers of such occurrences. Like the risen Kundalini, fires and snakes represent powerful, unpredictable, and potentially devastating primal forces. When such forces are unleashed, they cannot be taken lightly. I know of two people who committed suicide during overwhelming Kundalini episodes. I have met others who were locked in psychosis states for months or years. And I have heard of those who haven't survived the unimaginably ferocious physical manifestations of the risen Kundalini.

I don't mean to terrify anyone by these disclosures. I believe that for most of us, despite the

severity and painfulness of our process, we will survive and even live to rejoice in our transformation. But I think it's important to regard what we are experiencing with due respect. A Kundalini awakening is the most tremendous spiritual rebirth process known on earth. Even if we aren't always able to meet the next twist in our process with faith, courage, acceptance, trust or fortitude, it helps to remember the magnitude of what we are undergoing. Even the saints had a hard time enduring these things. How can we expect more of ourselves?

Sadly, we live in a society that pressures us to "normalize" everything, and to downplay or deny our extraordinary experiences. Being "in control" is extolled as the highest personal virtue. But those of us whose lives have been infused by spiritual energies know such control is illusory. Whether we feel elated and ecstatic or battered and broken by these energies, we cannot repress or stop them. Too often, this leads to self-condemnation.

What we are going through isn't normal, but that doesn't mean it's unnatural. We have become vehicles of the spectacular. It seems easier when we can accept whatever comes. It's okay to feel overwhelmed. It's okay to feel helpless, hopeless, angry and resentful. It's okay to feel incapable of suffering through another day, another hour, another minute of this incredibly demanding process. This too will pass.

I think we need to be as compassionate to ourselves as we can. Perhaps on some deep, heroic level, our souls have volunteered to go through this incredible fire. And whether we go through it consciously surrendered, or kicking and screaming every inch of the way, we can't turn back. No matter what we may at any moment feel about it, we are on an awesome, ancient and sacred path.

Chapter 9

SPIRIT VISITATIONS

"For most of my life I have been conscious of two worlds, two aspects of reality. One is the so-called normal world, revealed to us through our five senses... The other is a super-sensory reality, a metaphysical world of light and energy and essence, home to Intelligences more evolved than our own in many cases." -- David Spangler

Once, during the most intense phase of my awakening process, I was on the phone with my sister, who lives out of state from me. She knew that I was going through something mysteriously powerful, and that for long hours while Charles was at work, I was at home by myself. With great concern for me, she exclaimed, "You shouldn't be alone with this!" "I'm not alone," I told her. I had never felt so un-alone in all my life

She did not seem to understand, and continued to protest that I needed someone to watch over me during the day. With absolute conviction, I repeated, "I'm not alone." This, beyond anything else, has been the most joyous realization that Kundalini has bequeathed to me.

Mystical awakening brings us into the presence of the Divine. We have direct experience of what we may call God, Goddess, or spirit entities. Through the lens of altered consciousness, even the ordinary world shows itself to be dynamically alive, and amazingly permeated with powers and principalities. All spirits are energy, and all energy is conscious. Everything in creation is alive, everything is sentient; there is no dead matter nor isolate being in existence.

As awareness expands, we find ourselves audience to unknown atmospheric forces or hierarchies of fantastic beings. Various psychic entities make appearances through dreams, visions, voices, or other paranormal means. Many of us encounter etheric spiritual masters, deities and Light beings in these same ways. We come to know, as the writer Jay G. Williams has said, that "beyond the metaphors of human imagination, in the heart of reality, the angels do sing."

Those of us who are in the process of spiritual opening often have a vivid sense of the presence of our guardian angel or spirit teachers. According to Charles Breaux, who became clairvoyant in the course of his Kundalini awakening, every soul "has at least one spiritual tutor, commonly referred to as a Spirit Guide." He has found that "most people have several of these teachers and that we receive new teachers as we evolve."

Whether or not we are directly aware of them, these spirits have always been available to humanity. Thaddeus Golas, author of *The Lazy Man's Guide to Enlightenment*, reminds all seekers: "You're never alone -- there are many beings aware of you at all times, loving you, ready to make you feel it whenever you are ready to open up to it, taking care to see that you don't get in too deep, encouraging you to love yourself."

All religions and legends of world mythology recognize other world beings. Angels, archangels and devils or demons appear in the Bible and in Hebrew scripture. In the Koran, Muhammad is said to have taught jinn (disincarnate beings) as well as humans, just as Buddha purportedly

taught in the deva-loka as well as on earth. In her book *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook*, Paula Gunn Allen says that numerous kinds of beings who inhabit the Beyond have been depicted on ancient rock drawings, particularly those scattered throughout the Americas: "Some possess a human form; others look more like geometric figures. There are beings with wings, beaks, horns, tails, three fingers, snouts, scales, feathers, talons, claws, lots of eyes, no eyes, many arms, more than two legs -- in short, beings of greater variety than we ordinarily imagine." Direct encounter with these astral entities can be hair-raising, especially for those who previously believed such creatures were nothing but superstition.

Angelic spirits often appear in human form as strangers who mysteriously materialize to lend help. Spirits can take the guise of animals as well. Charles once noticed a grey dog standing outside the gate to our yard. Although he'd never seen this animal before, he didn't think much of it at first, since there are a lot of dogs in our area. But then he noticed the dog in the yard across the street had seen it too, and was staring at it intently. Charles suddenly realized something peculiar about this: none of the neighborhood dogs were barking, as they always do when an unfamiliar dog is in their territory. The grey dog wasn't a dog...

On several occasions, when someone has been directing angry thoughts at us, a bee or wasp pops out of nowhere inside our house. Twice when this happened we realized they were demonic spirits since they appeared to us in winter, when natural bees and hornets are hibernating. Both times, we shortly thereafter received nasty letters from a relative projecting bad feelings on us.

There are a lot of misconceptions about the spirits. A very conscientious woman wrote and said to me: "Although I have visions of wolves, birds, etc., I am very reluctant to regard these as medicine-animals or spirit allies because I feel I am appropriating a spiritual tradition to which I have no right. I am white. My race has nearly destroyed everything the First Nations held dear and sacred, so I do not feel I have a right to use their sacred traditions. Is there another way of looking at these guides?"

This woman also told me that she was a practicing Wiccan. Witches traditionally had animal-spirit allies, known to their persecutors as "familiaris." The early church took familiaris quite seriously; the presence of a spider or fly during an Inquisition trial was taken as damning evidence that the defendant was indeed a witch. The association of the black cat with witches is a holdover from the knowledge that many pre-Christian European healers worked with spirit helpers.

The spirits who are willing to assist us reveal themselves to us when we are ready. The idea of separate sacred beings for different religions is mostly a man-made distinction. The beings themselves are not in competition or opposition to each other; they all serve the same indivisible Whole. This understanding has helped me to integrate my own strange assemblage of holy assistants.

Of course we would not feel right about imitating sacred rites from unfamiliar traditions or about pretending to be who we are not. But unless we are otherwise inner directed, all that is required is a receptive and reverent attitude. Being respectful is of far more importance in this regard than being of a particular nationality or race.

Before my Kundalini awakening, I had only marginal interest in the Hindu, Tibetan and Native American traditions or in Goddess worship. But the spirits and symbols that have been presented through my personal Kundalini experiences have come from these varied traditions. (This is not to say that I therefore absorbed these traditions; I was only given a bit of needed guidance from these particular spirit teachers) Goddess connection, which was weakest of all for me before this all started, is now the most powerful to me. In *Shaking Out the Spirits*, Bradford Keeney tells of his visions and dreams of an eagle and other Amerindian totem animals, which disturbed him greatly since he had been Christian all his life. The many indigenous holy people from whom he sought advice told him essentially the same thing: There is no need to abandon your religion; just expand it to include the new truths and sacred experiences that come to you.

Sun Bear, who was a powerful medicine man, found that in his worldwide travels the spirits from all areas and traditions were eager to appear and communicate with him. He said these higher beings exist to help mankind, but for a very long time they have been waiting around with nothing to do because humans had shut down psychically. (Sadly, because so many venerable wisdom-traditions were forcibly supplanted by Western beliefs, until very recently, most Amerindians have been as closed to spirit-guides as were whites.) Except for a very sensitive few, most people could not perceive these otherworld beings or ask for their help (and they cannot intervene in our behalf unless invited).

In a conference, Bonnie Greenwell disclosed that altered states, alternate dimensions of consciousness, and contact with spirit guides and beings from other planes of existence are among the most life transforming experiences for those who have them, prompting them to redefine who they are and their role in life, their relationship to the planet and the cosmos, and their spiritual path. Depending on one's level of psychic receptivity and upon the nature of the spirit involved, contact with beings from other dimensions (including departed loved ones) can at times be startling and obvious, as when a figure suddenly materializes in front of us, or other times appear in a more subtle manner and rationalized away. The more tenuous contacts may at first escape our notice. Synchronistic sounds and sights from the environment, such as blinking lights or inexplicable noises, or even seemingly ordinary intrusions like the sudden call of a bird or a siren in the distance can actually be communication attempts from spirits. Ethnopsychologist Holger Kalweit points out that ancient societies who lived close to nature found their spirit advisors "from the plant and animal kingdoms and from elementary phenomena such as lightning, thunder, rainstorms, the sun, the moon, various planets, and also from a great variety of nonmaterial entities." Spirits in the modern world can manifest through electronic equipment and other man-made things. Absurd as it may seem, some beings even use the telephone to try to make contact. Although they rarely are able to make themselves heard vocally this way, they can make the phone ring (and it may seem that no one is on the other end of the line). I knew a woman who received such phantom calls (which the phone company was unable to trace) for several years. An excessive number of "silent" messages left on answering machines can be a sign of these "telephoning" spirits. Spirit Helpers

During the apex of my Kundalini awakening, I received inward instruction and sometimes saw visions of spiritual teachers (including a Tibetan monk and a Native American shaman). The information I received from them was always benevolent and helpful. Sometimes, a voice would respond when I asked questions, and sometimes I was answered through a simple form of

spontaneous sign language that operated through my own hands in a way similar to the mudras. I was taught disciplines and concepts foreign to my prior spiritual path. During a very intense phase, I saw and heard a Tibetan lama who guided me through an advanced form of meditation that I never would have been interested in (nor would have had the patience to attempt) before. This kind of unexpected intervention is not unusual for those in Kundalini processes. The deities and sacred icons that appear in dreams or visions may arise from a different culture or context than one's past religion. I know of several people of Jewish heritage who found themselves being drawn to Jesus through visions and dreams, and of Christians receiving messages from Hindu or Buddhist figures.

Helping figures may appear to us in human form, or they may be amorphous, often announcing their presence through emanations of light. For some, these masters and avatars appear only at times of greatest difficulty in the process. For others, inner guides and spiritual teachers may accompany most of the process, and may be accessible for years, or for the rest of one's life.

Spirit help is never extended against our wills. I received a letter from a man as follows: "I have read about people being forced into Shamanic initiation by the sort of spirits shamans deal with. They cause a Shamanic illness, which can only be cured through Shamanic means. These shamans are then forced to practice shamanism the rest of their lives in order to remain well. I do not want to be a slave to any animal spirits forcing me to interact with them. Do you have any information about this?" I told him that from all I have studied of shamanism (and through my personal experiences), I interpret the call somewhat differently. A Shamanic calling is of a different order than demonic possession, in which lower entities can force the individual to be at their disposal. It is my understanding that a shaman works with spirits from the higher planes, and is not involved with destructive forces in the way a sorcerer is.

The Shamanic calling is not to enslavement on any level, but rather a consecration to service. Shamans are intermediaries between humans and the spirits, and in this capacity they bring blessings and healing to their earthly communities. I believe that while those of us who receive the calling may have no interest in or desire for this "assignment," on the soul level, it is exactly what we came here to do. The messenger spirits come to assist us in fulfilling this mission, not to coerce us into doing something that is against our deepest will.

Most of the Shamanic literature I've found stresses that a true Shamanic calling cannot be refused without peril to oneself. This is not because the spirits refuse to respect our decision and are malevolent and spiteful. It is because the call is our soul mission -- our reminder of what we came here to do -- and to refuse it is to reject our own spiritual path. In nearly all the cases I am familiar with, the person who is receiving a Shamanic calling through sickness (or other life-disrupting experiences) has not consciously asked for this to happen. Often, they have very negative feelings about it during the early stages and want to rid themselves of it. Being a shaman is not easy, even in cultures where this vocation is wholly acknowledged and welcomed by the populace. The Shamanic path requires a great deal of integrity, faith and self-sacrifice, and often entails more personal suffering than other spiritual paths. Despite this, in my view, it is a great honor to be called to this ancient and sacred tradition. The spirits join us in a sacred partnership but do not expect us to prostrate ourselves to them. As the shaman Malidoma Some says, "You don't worship spirit, because you are also spirit, and spirits don't worship one another.

What makes you different overall is that you are locked into temporality. You have a body, like a piece of cloth that is decayable." Yet after this mortal body is shed, we join the unencumbered spirits in the ethereal realms.

The messages conveyed by such beings can be enigmatic and terse. One man repeatedly heard a voice proclaim: "The times will take care of themselves." This was frustrating to him, since he could not understand what it meant. Don't expect to be able to identify your spirit guides by their exultant messages. Some guides are pretty down to earth. For over thirty years, a Japanese guy has been popping up at intervals in my dreams, usually as a teacher. The first time he showed up, I thought, wow, a sage I can ask for advice! I asked him for guidance, expecting him to tell me something really profound. He said, "Get a job." (I did.)

The spirits may offer us gifts and power objects, which seem strange by modern standards. Several years into her dramatic Kundalini awakening, a woman named Rachel began receiving guidance from an entity that appeared to her as a nature sprite. Rachel was told to go out into her yard and dig in specified places, to precise depths. This went on daily for some weeks. Each of these expeditions unearthed some natural treasure, usually in the form of rocks or bones. One of these artifacts was a fist-sized piece of polished jade!

The Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac says in his tradition the spirits called Mannogemassak fashion magical stones (sometimes in the shape of an animal) "as special gifts to those humans who have won their favor." The mischievous sprite, whom Rachel called "Grumble", performed numerous poltergeist tricks which startled people who came to visit her. Objects in her home would mysteriously move or vanish altogether. Though some of her friends were alarmed by these paranormal antics, Rachel was never afraid. To the contrary, Grumble evoked her childlike delight, and often made her laugh.

Mysterious Allies

As with other aspects of awakening, contacts with beings from other planes are looked upon unfavorably by those who do not understand such things. Profound encounters with illuminating beings may be dismissed as mere dreams or imagination. Human spiritual advisors whose wisdom comes from religious dogma rather than through personal experience may take a particularly dim view of visitations by strange spirits. It can be especially disheartening when well-intentioned family or professionals insist upon medication or other treatment to terminate these experiences. (On the other hand, some people suddenly opened to perceive otherworld beings are so distressed by their encounters that they ask to be drugged.)

In Rachael's case, her neighbors were so taken aback by her harmless digging rituals that they called the police to investigate. Some people -- doctors and laymen alike -- fervently believe that hearing voices or seeing transcendent beings is always a sign of mental aberration. The person in transformation can easily find himself labeled schizophrenic because of his mystical experiences. And of course, there are those who warn that all visions and voices are the work of Satan. Rachael's friends tried to procure an exorcism, but she would have nothing to do with it. "Grumble is a part of me, " she explained years later. "If they were going to get rid of Grumble, they'd have to get rid of me, too."

Which leads to the question: Do these beings exist in their own right or are they merely aspects of our private psyches? If we delete merely, I think the answer is: Both. In a world where we have been conditioned to demand either/or distinctions, this answer can be difficult to accept. Yet for those of us experiencing a fuller range of awareness, it is obvious that the world is more complex and multileveled than the yes/no, right/wrong binary system to which we've been expected to confine ourselves. There are schools of metaphysics that claim that any event or relationship, worldly or otherwise, is simultaneously a counterpart or enactment of one's inner qualities and conflicts. This is the principle of: As above, so below. There are theories of psychology that espouse similar interconnections, regarding both subjective and objective experiences as meaningful expressions of the individual's mental and emotional development. I.e., what we see (or pay most attention to), or what we get ourselves involved in, is in some way a reflection of our personal psychological state. In this sense, everything in our experience can be both real and representational. Things actually happen, yet the way we experience these things also reveals something about ourselves.

This is a far cry from declaring paranormal or magical phenomena "imaginary" and therefore valueless. To me, the most peculiar thing is not that some of us have met with inhabitants from other planes, but that in the history of the world, only fairly recent Western thought has insisted upon such a sterile, materialist and so-called rationalist belief system that it excludes most of what has been central to life in nearly every culture. In our modern paradigm, everything that cannot be "proven" by limited mechanistic means is expelled from the realm of possibility. But this rather arrogant infatuation with our technologies is beginning to wear thin, even amidst the scientific community. Quantum physics has discovered the world to be more elusive and elastic than we had dreamed. Perhaps instead of asking if spirits are real, we should be asking if the Western model of reality is real. And instead of asking if our experiences are real, we should be asking ourselves if they are significant. Bradford Keeney, whose implicit trust in the spirit messages he received led him on a miracle-filled journey of pilgrimage, has observed that "Whether one believes one is encountering 'spirits,' 'walking dreams,' 'dreams,' or 'unconscious imagery,' is less relevant than respecting the learning and guidance coming from such experiences."

Throughout the world, institutional Christianity has played a heavy role in repressing all but its own select pantheon of heavenly saints and angels as spiritually valid. But at least the Church recognizes and grants approval to spirit contacts when they come in the form of apparitions of the Virgin Mary or visitations by Jesus Christ.

Mystics have always been somewhat of an embarrassment to whatever religion has borne them because they frequently encounter all nature of supernatural beings, regardless of their particular tradition's doctrine about such things. In his global study of shamanism, Kalweit mentions several cases in which Shamanic initiates from aboriginal cultures found themselves in spontaneous contact with spirits known only to their ancestors. Because Christian missionaries had long ago stripped the tribespeople of their native traditions, these newly developing shamans felt wary and resistant to the unfamiliar spirit guides. The spirit entities caused lots of trouble for them until they finally relented and accepted these beings as valid messengers from the Beyond. In one case, a Native American man had a vision in which Jesus told him to stop following the

white man's religion.

Thumps in the Night

Hearing the spirits requires stillness, an inner listening, rather than attempts to imagine something or spout truths. I hear spirits talking to me within myself -- from what the Cree call the *achimoona*, "the sacred place within." Spirits also speak in visual and other kinds of metaphors. When I was feeling very unsure of myself while writing this book, the spirits gave me a welcome literary critique. I had been struggling with a particularly difficult chapter for weeks, but the more I worked on it, the more it seemed to be getting tied up in knots. After a day of marathon writing, I took a nap. While in the hypnogogic state, I distinctly heard the turning of pages. I thought perhaps it was Charles reading a newspaper in the dining room. The sound of rustling pages shifted and became the beating of wings. They seemed to be flying down the hallway toward our bedroom; the next thing I knew, the wings were flapping inside my head. This was so startling I almost pulled myself out of the trance. Then I remembered that noises of this sort were not uncommon to Kundalini. This knowledge gave me the courage to stay with the experience for awhile, curious to see what might happen.

The next thing I heard was the blast of a horn in my ear, so loud it hurt my eardrum. This was immediately followed by another horn, more melodic, that sounded like a saxophone playing a short riff from within my stomach. My solar plexus vibrated with the musical notes, which I found both exhilarating and amusing.

Then I heard the bleating of a lamb -- a sweet, touching sound.

At this point, I awoke from the trance. It struck me that I'd never heard anyone describe this kind of Kundalini experience before. I wondered if there might be some significance to the specific sounds I'd heard...

As I reflected on this, I realized I'd received an audio-telegram from the spirits. The sound of beating wings had been their signature, and the rustling pages were my book. The message, as best as I could translate it, was as follows:

1. The book was in the hands of the Spirit. (This came as a relief to me, as I had from the start envisioned the book as a consecration to the Spirit, but sometimes I felt it was wandering in other directions.)
2. I was honking my own horn too loud.
3. It was good for me to sound my horn, but I needed to play it with feeling (from my guts).
4. My intent was pure and blessed by Christ consciousness (the bleating lamb).

All of these points were relevant for me. I'd feared I was straying from my heart in some of what I'd written, but the lamb was reassurance that I was on track. I was also concerned about putting too much autobiographical material in the book, but sound of the the saxophone indicated it was

okay to play my song, as long as I watched my tendency to sound like I was bragging (an overcompensation for having long done the opposite and being so self-effacing people took it as invitation to treat me like a second-class citizen). A little modesty was in order.

Some of the more playful astral beings may resemble children or animals. Some make sounds. I encountered one friendly being that made a staccato noise like a Geiger counter. This critter was not visible to me, but I could track its whereabouts in my house by hearing its crackling noises. It would jump from one area to the next at lightning speed. I would hear it at the far end of the house, then a second later, it would be right behind me. It was quite a considerate spirit. The first time it made its audio appearance right next to my face, I told it that it was scaring me and asked it to please back off a bit. Thereafter, it always kept a respectful distance from me. It was my uninvited guest for several weeks, until a friend who also heard it became worried and wanted to do a ceremonial magic rite to banish it. I wasn't sure about the necessity of banishing, but to humor my friend, I agreed. Either my friend's spell worked or the crackling entity didn't want to hang around where it wasn't wanted. Either way, that was the last I heard of it.

The very idea of any kind of spirit entities give some people the willies. Once, while visiting my friend Andy, we heard a shrill whistle at the far end of his house. "What's that?" I inquired.

He said his three housemates thought it was coming from the basement water heater, but he wasn't sure. The noise was intermittent; sometimes it would sound several times a day, sometimes several days would pass in silence.

"It could be a spirit," I ventured. I had barely spoken when a sharp whistle emitted from directly below the kitchen table where we were seated.

We both froze. After an instant's pause, Andy said in a feigned casual tone, "It's probably just the water heater." I stared at him. We both knew there was no way it could be the water heater, but we let the subject drop.

Hostile Encounters

Paula Gunn Allen remarks that many spirit beings "are reasonably friendly or neutral toward humans who venture among them, but many are unfriendly indeed." Among Native Americans (and other indigenous peoples) she says that "Supernaturals are treated with enormous respect and approached with great caution and reverence because they are not controllable by humans, whose powers are always less than theirs." She warns that "Western neo-Pagans, generally unaware of the perils of exchanges with the spirit people, take real risks courting their attention." Taking a cavalier attitude toward the spirits is a big mistake. Guardian spirits reside in sacred places -- in areas known as power spots, in places where spiritual ceremonies are conducted, and in burial grounds. Disturbing gravesites or sanctified areas can provoke the wrath of the protecting spirits.

On the day I read Joseph Bruchac's assertion that "bad luck has come to both the white and Indian communities alike as a result of those ancestors [whose graves were unearthed] not being placed back to rest," there was an article in the newspaper about a 5,000 year old Ohlone burial

site uncovered during excavation from a California housing division. The archeologist hired by the builder gave assurances that the remains had been removed to a safe location... "Safe" by what criteria?

Bruchac also tells of special places in Hawaii where ignorant tourists -- despite posted warnings that removal of the rocks is illegal -- pocket sacred stones for souvenirs. Every year, says Bruchac, "the park service in Hawaii receives more than a ton of such stones sent back in individual packages, carefully wrapped by those who purloined them, usually with maps drawn to show just exactly where, please, the stones should be replaced. The letters which accompany those returned rocks usually contain catalogues of the misfortunes which befell those who stole the stones."

Aside from the guardian spirits who will retaliate against desecrators, there are bad news spirits who are simply demons. Saints such as the remarkable healer, Padre Pio, although blessed by spiritual protectors, have had innumerable run-ins with these nasty denizens of the underworld. I know from personal experience that these unevolved entities exist, some of whom are outright destructive. Some of these entities resemble human figures, while others seem protoplasmic. Some appear as nebulous forces such as sudden strong winds, eruptions that may shake the house, shadows, etc. I once was approached by a malefic entity that exuded a putrefying stench. I somehow intuitively knew that this entity was an astral vampire. Years later, when I retold this incident to a man who was a long time student of the occult, he informed me that esoteric lore describes vampires as always having the foul odor of rotting carrion.

Demonic beings are generally distinguishable from spirit guides and deities. Some people prefer to call demonic spirits "negative energies," and perceive them as such. These entities are conscious, and in their own right, intelligent, though the form in which they appear to us can vary from ghoulish apparitions to miasmatic forces, or simply a sudden feeling of something sinister in the air.

Demons often appear grotesque or feel ominous in some way. I feel a definite cold draft or chill when such entities are present. I believe this is because these beings are energy-draining. Beings from higher planes radiate rather than absorb energy from us. Frequent these higher beings are seen surrounded by light, or as luminous clouds.

The strangest dark entity I ever came across personally was some kind of astral mollusk that awoke me in the night. It came sailing at me from out of nowhere and forcefully (and, it seemed, deliberately) collided with my neck. It made a squishing sound on impact, and I actually felt a very cold, wet, slimy sensation of the thing's body slathered against my skin. Instinctively, I tried to grab it off me, but when I reached for it, my hand felt nothing. Puzzled, I fell back asleep. The next day, I awoke with a severe sore throat that lasted for about a week.

If these entities speak to us, another tip off is the content of the messages. The lower entities are crude and nasty in what they say. They may "advise" us to do harm to ourselves or to others. Regardless of who these entities claim to be, and whether they communicate to us through a voice, automatic writing, or other apparently supernatural means, Roberto Assagioli advised that we examine them "with much discrimination and sound judgment, and without being influenced

by their uncommon origin or by any claim of their alleged transmitter." In his book *Psychosynthesis*, Assagioli went on to warn that "No validity should be attributed to messages containing definite orders and commanding blind obedience, and to those tending to exalt the personality of the recipient."

The late Phoebe Bendit, a psychotherapist who devoted many years to parapsychological research, warned that while rare, "there are independent entities which can disguise themselves in the form of divine beings, saints, or Masters, and who may try to mislead or 'tempt' the student at this level." While trickster entities will easily lie about their identities, and misrepresent themselves as light-bringers with names like "Eternal Brotherhood" or "Intergalactic Oneness," two ways to double-check a supposed higher being is to mentally shine the Christ light on the entity, or by calling upon a genuine saint or deity to inspect it. If the spirit is what it says it is, it will be able to withstand these tests. If not, it will vanish.

Whether through naiveté or over-zealous enthusiasm for their work, these tests for authenticity seem to be unknown or ignored by many channelers. Channelers should be suspicious if an entity tells them they have been chosen as sacred message-bearers because they are superior to other human beings in some way. Spiritual messages delivered by higher beings never pander to the ego. Most importantly, higher beings never instruct us to do anything dangerous or hurtful (and imagining ourselves better than other people, is hurtful both to them and to ourselves). Our spiritual guides may be quite strict and demanding, and they may ask us to risk ourselves in new ways. But they never push us toward self-aggrandizement, debasement or perversion. Trust your instincts with this. If for any reason you feel nervous or uneasy around a spirit, tell it to take a hike.

Some authorities erroneously claim that malevolent entities or voices are never experienced during a Kundalini awakening. For those who have only had contact with the illumined beings (or with none at all), the idea that spirituality is protection against lesser entities may be reassuring. But such assumptions are hurtful to those whose experience includes these negative contacts. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that spiritual awakening may encompass high as well as low encounters. I would be more concerned about the absence of encounters with higher entities than the presence of demonic beings for those who have been opened to such realms. Yet even here, generalizations can be damaging. If the individual is stable and able to deal with her experiences, regardless of their nature, I wouldn't worry.

Demonic entities don't flock in legion to individuals with expanded consciousness, nor does the perceiving of such an entity mean that something diabolical is happening to us. Like spiritual guides, these lower beings coexist with human life, even though few people are aware of this. At a point in her own awakening, Irina Tweedie was able to see dark shapes attached to people or following them around. She also saw Devas and angelic spirits glowing and dancing about. We live amidst many types of consciousness in both the organic and psychic realms.

I don't want to prescribe all-purpose ways of dealing with disturbing entities because I doubt there is such thing as correct protocol in these matters -- or if there is, I don't have the wisdom to offer it. The classical admonition to psychics is to avoid apparently unfriendly entities by simply ignoring them. If they can't be ignored, telling them to leave is usually sufficient. One woman

who is psychically awakened says that whenever she senses such entities in the vicinity, she mentally warns them, "Don't even think about it!" This scares them off. "Whenever you meet such a being in the subtle realms," advises author and counselor Nathaniel Altman, "you need to follow your intuition regarding its intent. If you have any doubts at all, speak from your innermost being, 'If you come in the name of God, you are welcome. If not, please go away.' This should be followed with a prayer to God for protection and clarity." If the beings seem persistent or troublesome, a more forceful approach may be required. In the story of his own transformation, Brugh Joy tells of bellowing "Get out!" at a threatening entity. (It did.)

The use of incense discourages "bad" spirits, as does the burning of sage and cedar in "smudge" purification rites of Native Americans. Sunlight disperses them, so open the window blinds if they are haunting dark rooms indoors. Beautiful music will help to drive them away as well.

I have found in my own experience that even the most frightening or evil-appearing entities respond favorably to honesty and genuine appreciation of their powers. High or low, I am truly awed by these beings and I don't hesitate to communicate this to them. I don't try to flatter a hideous apparition by pretending that I find it beautiful; rather, I compliment it on its unsurpassed, magnificent ugliness. Horrible entities not only know that they are horrible; they generally enjoy being horrible. At any rate, their characteristics are not their fault; this is just their nature, the way they were made to be. (And like anyone else, they want to be respected for exactly who they are.)

Calling upon help from on high (from the Goddess, Jesus, spirit guides, a beloved guru, etc.) is another effective way to deal with threatening entities. Once, when I was in the hypnogogic state between sleep and waking, I was accosted by a bevy of demons that scrambled all over me. I could feel them pawing at my astral body and chattering away while I lay in bed, fully aware of my situation, but unable to move. With all my will, I fought to awaken. Then I mentally surrounded myself with light. Too tired to do more than this, I lapsed back into a twilight state. Again, they attacked me, but they had changed form. I could tell they were the same entities, but this time they manifested as a swarm of buzzing flies, dive bombing my head and face. I called upon the late Neem Karoli Baba (a Hindu saint) for help, and suddenly all was peaceful and still.

In my personal experience, there has always been a reason for the appearance of entities, no matter how unevolved or frightening they may seem. They are invariably messengers of some kind, and if I am attentive, I usually get a sense of what it is they want or what they've come to reveal to me. After I receive the message, I thank the being for coming to me. If it is a disturbing entity, I then tell it to "return to your rightful place in the universe" and reassure it (demons have fears too) that the light will guide it home and it will be safe.

I have on occasion felt the presence of beings (not necessarily malevolent) who were trying to use me as a channel. I have no interest in mediumship, and I mentally make this clear to them. I tell them that I won't voluntarily be an instrument they can speak through, but if they have something they want to say, I'm willing to hear it directly. Then I can decide whether or not I want to convey their message to others. (So far, this stipulation has always caused them to retreat.)

One very interesting phenomenon Bonnie Greenwell has come across in her practice is individuals whose Kundalini rose after they had been contacted by aliens or had UFO abductee experiences! In a few cases, the individual had already been in a Kundalini process when the alien contact occurred. (There have also been many reports of spontaneous Kundalini awakenings in the wake of NDEs.) Greenwell speculates that as our consciousness expands, we become receiving stations, able to detect communications from a much broader range of Intelligences in the universe.

The Little People

Nature spirits, or Devas, are a class unto themselves. They are deeply distrustful of mankind, and may be sullen or angry, but are not inherently malicious. A.E. Powell says that "They will also sometimes masquerade in thought-forms that men have made, and think it a great joke to flourish horns, to lash a forked tail, and to breathe out flame as they rush about." However, Powell (a theosophist whose source of information was secondhand reports from other psychics) is mistaken in so many of his commentaries that I question this one as well. I suspect that these "thought-form devils" were, in fact, appearances of fauns.

Robert Ogilvie Crombie (a.k.a. "Roc"), one of the original members of the Findhorn community, said that his first encounter with a faun came after he had been meditating under a beech tree. He felt his identity merge with that of the tree; then the faun appeared. The faun was greatly startled to realize Roc had noticed it.

"I don't believe it," it told him. "Humans can't see us."

Roc replied, "Oh, yes. Some of us can."

He later encountered the king of the fauns, the nature god Pan, who grilled him to test his prejudices: "Did not the early church take me as a model for the devil? Look at my cloven hooves, my shaggy legs, and the horns on my forehead."

To which Roc responded, "The church turned all pagan gods and spirits into devils, fiends, and imps."

The first time I clearly saw one of these earth elementals was after my Kundalini arose. One afternoon, I glanced out the window to my backyard garden and saw a figure of what looked like a stocky, greenish colored nine-year-old child perched high in the walnut tree. I looked away, then realized this was extremely odd. I immediately looked again, and the "child" was gone. Those with a tenacious Western mindset may find this anecdote silly and inconsequential. We are socially programmed to weigh everything from a strictly utilitarian standpoint. Unless the green elemental endowed me with impressive powers or gave me information, which was to my advantage in everyday life, what good was it? One might as well ask what good is seeing a rainbow. For those of us who have been permitted glimpses into other worlds, the privilege of perceiving these wondrous beings is good enough.

There are a lot of make-believe games done in the name of conjuring spirits by people who would keel over if a real spirit appeared. This is beyond stupidity; it's dangerous. Spirits are real and the entities who are most likely to be attracted by brazen invocations are not the ones you want hanging around. Calling upon spirit allies in the form of "power" animals has become popular in the seminar circuits. This is often done without respect or understanding of the spirits. I've heard of workshop leaders instructing participants to choose their animal guides or even to pick an animal ally for another participant. Our allies don't function like mail order brides. They come to us in our dreams, visions, or life experiences, not from our preferences.

If I were to select my own guides, I probably would have chosen a dolphin or a deer. Years ago, a woman who claimed to be able to see people's animal guides by touching their foreheads told me mine guide was an elephant (probably because my name is El). My ally spirits do not include any of these animals. Instead, I have been repeatedly visited by a tiger, turtles, snakes, and other creatures. Charles has some of these same allies, including a bear, which appeared when he and I were together in one of my dreams. Other people's allies can make themselves known to us in various ways. Whenever I was in contact with Glenn Morris, his black Ninja spiders would materialize (as actual spiders) in my house.

For those who have never before realized how vast and innumerable are the inhabitants of the universe, becoming aware of entities from other realms may be initially alarming. It may be especially difficult to accept these experiences as something more than fantasy when you alone have witnessed them. I've been fortunate in having plenty of validation in this regard. Throughout my life, though I've never made any attempt to conjure or otherwise solicit these metapsychic beings, I've had so many interactions with them that I am convinced of their reality. Also, quite a number of my encounters with spirits have occurred in the presence of one or more other people, who also saw, heard or felt the entity.

Beyond this, many of us have come to regard the entire debate between internal and external as a dualistic illusion. Spatial location and origin loses relevance at more encompassing levels of awareness, as does concern over how much we are creating and how much we are simply participating in any of our life events. Whether the spirits ultimately come from inner space, outer space, or somewhere beyond our comprehension seems to be missing the point. What is more important to me is the opportunity for heart and soul communion with these magical beings, and through this, my reconnection to the majesty of existence.

Chapter 10

COPING WITH KUNDALINI

"Patience -- Faith. There are powers operating in the universe and in yourself which are beyond your everyday experience. Trust these deeper currents of life; let yourself flow with them." -- Sallie Nichols

Very few of us are fortunate enough to have a gifted healer or spiritual master to help us through the myriad difficulties of the transformational process. For those who find themselves on their own, the roller coaster of spiritual emergence can be bewildering and more than a little frightening. Even when we understand what is happening, it can be very hard to accept, trust and bear with this process. Nicola Kester, a former coordinator of the Spiritual Emergence Network (SEN), says that many Westerners experiencing involuntary Kundalini are "disoriented, frightened, and angry" and the most frequent question asked is "How can I make it go away?" Kester says "there are no clear ways to make it go away... often, there is no stopping Kundalini once it has begun to rise. Like physical birth, it cannot be held back." I do know of a few cases where the individual was able to shut down the risen Kundalini for a period of time -- but not indefinitely. Reverend Shoshana Shaw found the process, with its attendant psychic gifts, just too overwhelming in the face of her family obligations. She did not know she was experiencing Kundalini, but she prayed that whatever it was (and she knew it was some sort of living, intelligent presence), might be "removed temporarily" until she could deal with it. In a few months, the mysterious presence vanished, and while Shoshana was relieved to have the burden lifted, she also felt a great loss. "My husband found me crying and asked what was wrong. I told him I felt a very precious part of me had left, and I felt so sad and empty."

Some twelve years later, after her children were grown, her husband had retired and she had become "bored and depressed," her Kundalini rose again. It came without warning in the middle of the night, erupting with such force it rammed her into the headboard of her bed. This time, the return of the sacred Kundalini fires was wholly welcome and rejuvenating: "I came alive again." Whether or not we regard Kundalini as a living, conscious and intelligent inner presence, in certain phases of the process, we are likely to be in such a heightened state of consciousness that we receive guidance from voices, visions, lucid dreams, or we may simply have a powerful intuitive knowing that directs us to do exactly what we need at that moment. At other, more barren stretches of the journey, we feel lost and unsure of what will nurture us and ease our passage. In my own long awakening process, there have been many times when I wished there were someone I could trust to advise me. But in my case, the greatest external guidance I've received in my life has always come from books. My Kundalini awakening hasn't altered this pattern; it was, in fact, passages I read in books that initially made me realize that my Kundalini had spontaneously arisen.

The advice in this chapter is a compilation of the recommendations I have read and learned through my own experiences for surviving the turbulence of transformation. But I think we need to remember that each of us is unique, and that we each have an individual life path and different resources available to us. What may work beautifully for one person might be of no use to another. Even within our own process we may find that our needs change, and discover that what

gets us through one stage of unfolding is insufficient or inappropriate at another point.

Grounding

In other times and other cultures which recognized spiritual transformation, the initiate in powerful stages of awakening would be isolated in a protected place, and would usually be watched over day and night by others who made sure he was not harmed during the exhaustive process. In our modern world, most of us don't have the luxury of such a safe, secluded place nor the aid of supportive attendants willing (or able) to stay with us around the clock so that we can freely abandon ourselves to our process. The energies that erupt within us may be so mentally and physically electrifying that we fear for our survival. "The experience of increased, high-voltage energy doesn't last forever," Vicki Noble reminds us. "It eventually stabilizes, as do the emotions that have been aroused in response to it." In the meantime, there are certain measures we can take to ground ourselves (or at least to tone down the energies). The most frequent suggestions are:

1. Long walks, vigorous exercise, running or dancing (Caution: in extreme heightened states, physical movement accelerates the energy rather than providing release.)
2. Physical labor. This works best if it is both physically engaging and a fairly mindless, repetitious task which requires little mental concentration (such as scrubbing floors or pulling weeds).
3. Steady, gentle, non-demanding activities such as crafts or needlework
4. Communing with nature, especially in a serene, private setting. Sometimes full bodily contact with a tree or the earth can be very grounding. For about six weeks during my process, I received inner guidance to go barefoot. This was during the time when the electrical currents in my body were most intense; the energy coursed through my feet into the ground more easily without the insulation of socks and shoes.
5. In extremely energetic states, one is apt to go for long periods without sufficient food or sleep. The resulting stress on the organism amplifies these energies. If you are prone to spontaneous trance states or dysfunctional "spacing out," be careful to keep up your blood sugar through eating regular small meals or snacks, even if you aren't hungry. And try to get plenty of rest.
6. Increase food intake and include more protein and sugar in the diet. (At times in the process, one is apt to have food cravings, particularly for sweets, dairy products or meat.)
7. Avoid practices that stimulate changes in consciousness, such as meditation, fasting, breathwork and so forth.
8. Make love. Some people find that the release of orgasm balances the psychospiritual energies.
9. Although not recommended, substances such as alcohol and tobacco can decrease the energy within the system. (A SEN volunteer told me she had heard many cases where even those who

had quit smoking years previously had taken up cigarettes again when they had Kundalini awakenings.) My personal Kundalini symptoms have been so extreme and continuous, I can't imagine how much stronger they might have become had I successfully quit smoking. But these generalizations may not fit every case.

Prescription psychoactive drugs (antidepressants and antipsychotics) can arrest or completely abort a transformational process. This may sound desirable to those who are having a hard time of it, but these drugs do not return one to normal; instead, they tend to freeze the process in its present state. Worse, antidepressants can trigger psychosis for those in a delicate psychospiritual state, and the neuroleptics (antipsychotics) can cause tardive dyskinesia, a persistent and in many cases irreversible pathological syndrome which resembles kriyas! (This is discussed at greater length in Chapter Fifteen in the section "The Medical Mine Field.") Even so, some people are so prone to severe depression or debilitating psychosis in the heightened states that they cannot function without the temporary aid of these drugs.

10. Some people have had success grounding excessive Kundalini energies with magnets. It would probably be best to try this under the supervision of a health worker who utilizes magnets in his/her practice.

11. Many healers suggest visualizing one's energy moving down through the feet and legs into the earth as a grounding technique. However, there is some controversy about this. The Tibetan shaman Lama Shakyia Zangpo warns against this, as it may inadvertently open channels for underworld beings to emerge and cause havoc; in rare cases even entity-possession may occur. When spaciness is a problem, he recommends bringing the energies back into the body by concentrating on the heart chakra. He recommends doing this by visualizing a sky blue light in the heart.

12. Service to others. (This has worked most often and most reliably in my own instance; focusing on someone else's needs and lending my help and support has kept me from dissolving into oblivion -- or panic -- during my protracted periods in altered states.)

Pain

The worst thing you can do is to resist what is happening; that will only make it more difficult. The best thing is to go completely into whatever comes up, fully experiencing it and moving through it. -- Stanislav and Christina Groff

Another major difficulty that comes up often in transformation is physical and mental/emotional pain. While much of the pain may be fleeting and therefore bearable, some is more corrosive. Our bodies and psyches are being torn apart and regenerated, and unfortunately, this process usually hurts. While it is not generally possible to completely eliminate pain, there are things we can do to alleviate it.

1. Baths. If the problem is insufferable bodily heat from the risen Kundalini, cool baths may provide relief. If the problem is muscle pains, warm baths may be soothing. Some individuals have told me that baths have been very grounding for them. In my personal experience, water

(especially showers) intensifies the energy in my body. (Authentic Movement teacher Janet Adler found it so easy to slide into spontaneous trance states while in a warm bath that she utilized this method for years of her Kundalini process. Eventually, in order to regain her grounding, she had to avoid baths altogether.)

2. Massage, bodywork, chiropractic treatments, acupressure or aura work (such as Therapeutic Touch). Warning: unless this is done by a very sensitive, experienced person who is respectful of the Kundalini, it can disturb the delicate energy balance in the system and cause more pain.

3. Adjustments in diet. This may be especially necessary during periods of digestive difficulties. Experiment with dietary changes to find out what works best for you. (For more on this topic, see the section on "Nutrition" later in this chapter.)

4. Follow internal cues. This is in line with the old joke where the patient says, "Doctor, it hurts when I bend over like this," and the doctor replies, "Well, then don't bend over like that." Listen to what your body is telling you.

Learning to respect our body/minds means more than taking note of which foods sit well with us and obliging our needs for rest and recreation. Many of us try to impose regimes of various sorts upon ourselves which are met with resistance. For instance, every time we try to meditate we may become fidgety or fall asleep; the yoga routine we promised ourselves we would practice daily always manages to get interrupted or postponed; our attempts to be more patient or to have more faith get emotionally sabotaged; and so on. Rather than considering these lapses failures and condemning ourselves, we can let our resistance be our teacher.

There may be an excellent reason why our subconscious (or the Universe) is balking at our plans. It may be that the things we believe we are supposed to be doing are not right for us, or not right at this time. Maybe some unrecognized need or ingrained notion is in conflict with what our conscious mind intends. Until we attend to the resisting part of ourselves, willing to hear what this internal protester has to say, we will be locked in battle against ourselves.

Here as in other places in this book, when I speak of heeding inner guidance, this does not usually mean that a voice will spell out detailed directions or give us an assessment of what is happening and how to proceed. While some people genuinely hear spirit voices (or are contacted by illumined teachers in dreams or apparitions), some channeled entities are not particularly intelligent nor wise, and some are simply manufactured by the ego.

I have witnessed people kid themselves into believing they were channeling spirit messages or that a magical intuitive force unerringly directed their lives. If the information coming to us differs little from our desires, opinions and logical deductions, it is probably not intuitive. When the messages we receive in this way do not shed new light on our problems or enable us to deal more effectively with real issues in our lives, they are simply fantasy. People whose lives feel empty sometimes create make-believe spirit contacts to lead them on "important" but meaningless adventures, producing an even more alienated existence. The messages they receive are often contrived, esoteric-sounding narratives. By contrast, actual spirit messages are frequently brief and to the point. I.e., "Stop!" or "Get off the bus now."

I rarely receive guidance through words or thoughts. The information I need comes to me through my dreams, instincts, physical sensations, and through "agreements" and synchronicities in the outer world. Often I have to work at understanding what I am being told. If the guidance concerns a major decision, I don't give a lot of credence to my hunches unless a message seems to be given repeatedly.

For instance, before Charles and I created our Internet version of Shared Transformation, several other groups had invited us to place our Web pages on their sites. This seemed like a great idea, and I was enthused over it, but every time I tried to put together material for our Web pages, I got a headache. I didn't immediately interpret this to mean that we shouldn't take one of the groups up on their offer. But when we tried to send one group an e-mail message apologizing for the delay in getting our material to them, the computer crashed. This second omen, on top of my headaches, made me wonder if we were being warned against developing our Web pages for this site. Then I had a dream in which I had become a member of a club, which held its meetings in a jailhouse. Upon awakening, I realized the dream was telling me that the Internet groups, which had issued the invitations, would be too restrictive for us. It was then that Charles and I decided to set up our Web pages independently.

Learning to trust our body/minds as much as we trust our rational ideas and the authority of other people is the key to autonomy. Our culture has long been intolerant of nonrational knowledge and to the degree that we are in collusion with the "left brain only" value system, we deprive ourselves of a great font of inner wisdom.

5. Allow automatic movements to occur. When the kriyas and mudras begin to happen, they may seem so alien to us that we try to repress these spontaneous physical movements. This can create more pain. I always feel an insistent ache in my arms right before the mudras occur. If I let my arms start to move, the pain vanishes, but if I resist the movements, the pain gets worse. If you have strong urges to move in a particular way, go off where you have privacy and let this happen. It can be especially disconcerting when the facial muscles automatically move, causing one to make grotesque grimaces or opening the mouth so wide it hurts. These movements and postures, which occur while resting in bed or at other times, may seem very odd, but they are the body's attempts to acclimate and balance the spiritual energies.

Some people have discovered they were causing themselves pain by mentally and physically clamping down against the energies. Relaxing this mental and bodily tension may at first cause lots of shaking in the body, but this isn't harmful.

When the Kundalini has risen, it is common for the arms and body to move in sinuous motions during meditation. For several months in my own process, these movements were so wild that I had to stop meditating altogether. When I tried to sit to meditate, I would find myself writhing all over the place so much it was exhausting, not to mention ridiculous. I later learned that these excessive movements are themselves a form of moving meditation, and help both the body and the psyche to adjust to the exuberant dance of the Kundalini energy.

I know of people whose meditation teachers were critical of these spontaneous movements and insisted they be stopped. I have also heard of yoga teachers who disapproved of students whose

awakened Kundalini thrust them into postures that the teacher had not suggested and did not feel were correct. Yet there are yoga and meditation teachers who have undergone Kundalini awakenings themselves and who support the process.

6. Flow with the pain. Sometimes I find that if I just accept the pain, and soften around it, I experience it in a much less tormenting way. There have been times when I've been helped to do this by using Stephen Levine's mantra, "Just this much," which is a variation of sorts on the "One day at a time" motto of the recovery movement, only in this case, it is "One microsecond at a time." Occasionally, this flowing-with-it actually changes the feeling from pain to a pleasurable streaming sensation.

7. Experiment with mentally moving the energy. This has been beneficial to me in dealing with my spine pain. I mentally go into the pain and circulate the energy in the places where it feels stuck. This requires a lot of concentration but is one of the few methods I've found that help with severe pain.

8. Self-hypnosis and visualizations. These techniques can reduce pain for some.

9. Meditation and yoga. The gentle stretching movements of yoga can alleviate some pains and help open up pathways for the energies. Vipassana meditation is particularly good for coping with physical or emotional pain. Through the practice of cultivated awareness and acceptance (also known as mindfulness or Insight Meditation), one learns to let go of inner resistances to the pain. Shinzen Young, a Vipassana teacher who has worked extensively with people in severe pain, comments: "Just as pain multiplied by resistance equals suffering, pain multiplied by acceptance equals spiritual cleansing or purification." To Young, the greatest benefit of this meditation is that it "fosters rapid personal evolution: a releasing of psychological and spiritual blockages; a kind of deep and permanent cleansing of the very substance of your soul."

10. Music. When my back pain was most ferocious, I spent hours merging into beautiful, soothing music I listened to through headphones. While I wasn't transported away from the pain, I was less self-identified with it.

11. Prayer. Mother Meera (considered to be one of the living incarnations of the divine Mother) has said that all prayers to the Goddess are eventually answered, and that even when She cannot take the suffering away (some pain and suffering are an inevitable and necessary part of spiritual growth), She always acts in compassion to soften one's suffering. In my seven years of praying to the Goddess, I have found this to be true.

The Goddess is the deification of divine mercy and love; this is why I am attuned to Her in my prayers. Prayer is very personal and is most effective when it is directed to the Higher Power that has the greatest resonance for you.

12. Dialogue with the pain or physical symptom. This can bring up very fruitful insights and revelations. Ask the pain (or symptom) who it is and what it wants from you. Allow your imagination free reign with this. Sometimes it takes several dialogue sessions to get anywhere (and it may seem like nothing meaningful is happening). But if you persist, you might learn

something valuable about yourself (or about the universe) and may discover the pain is reduced or disappears in the process.

13. Pain medication. There were times during my awakening when I was clearly told not to take any drugs/chemicals into my body. There have been other times when I was permitted to take medications (in moderation) to relieve my most painful symptoms. (This "permission" came in the sense that these medicines became available to me and I had no adverse reaction, physically or psychically, when I made use of them.) I have used, at various times in my process, Valium (good for relieving muscle spasms), Flexeril (a muscle relaxant that has helped with my back pain), Codeine (another godsend for taking the edge off my agonizing spine pain) and aspirin. Irina Tweedie practically lived on aspirin and caffeine in the form of black coffee for the first five years of her Kundalini awakening. You'll need to stay closely in touch with your own system to know how purist you should be about this.

14. Herbs, vitamin and mineral supplements, and aromatherapy are sometimes very useful for pain relief.

15. During periods when we are experiencing a lot of emotional pain, being able to talk about this to a kind, caring, nonjudgmental person can be of tremendous help. Caroline Myss says this "deeply healing process of sharing your pain with another" is necessary for self-validation. One does this "not so that the other person can make [the pain] go away, but because no one can bear the inner weight of suffering alone. Somehow, if only one other person is aware of the grief we carry, the burden becomes easier to bear because the suffering no longer seems meaningless and unacknowledged."

16. There are all sorts of specific remedies and treatments advised by various healers. For example: rubbing sesame oil on the top of the head (or sometimes on the back and other parts of the body) is said to relieve Kundalini pain and to loosen energy blockages. (When I tried it, the only thing it seemed to do was make me greasy.) Homeopathic, Aryurvedic, flower essences and other remedies are helpful for some people for some Kundalini symptoms.

For rapid heartbeat, you might try putting an ice cube in your mouth. This has been very effective for some people with tachycardia. It has been speculated that the reason this works is because the vagus nerve that is connected to the heart runs into the mouth.

17. Be patient. When Bonnie Lee Hood (who has done a great deal of research on spiritual emergence) was asked at a conference what was most useful in getting through the worst parts of the process, she answered, "Time." Many of the painful or hard to bear aspects of awakening will eventually work themselves out without intervention. Simply being willing to "be with" whatever is happening, and allowing our healing to unfold at its own pace, may be all that is needed. And sometimes, when we seem to be stuck at a difficult impasse, it is not until we are able to surrender to the process that we finally come upon inner or external guidance to help us move on.

During his expedition through the wilds of Africa, a sage approached Carl Jung with this tip: "You know, Mister, this here country is not man's country, it's God's country. So if anything

should happen, just sit down and don't worry." Jung realized this advice applied equally to embarking on a journey through what he called "the unconscious," meaning everything beyond the threshold of ordinary consciousness, including things of a divine nature. As his biographer Barbara Hannah later wrote, Jung understood that "not man but God was in command here -- in other words -- not will and intention, but inscrutable design." To sit down without worry meant "accepting the inscrutable design that reveals itself and never trying to push through his own way," never "trying to control the uncontrollable."

Other Problems

1. Agoraphobia, panic attacks and other mental/emotional distress may occur when the chakras are opening and one is becoming hypersensitive to atmospheric psychic energies. Agoraphobia -- an abnormal fear of open spaces, crowds, or public areas -- is a misnomer, because it is not the places or the population that causes the problem, but a visceral reaction of the body and psyche to multiple dischordant energies usually found in large groups. Even one person carrying a psyche full of rage, greed, fear or aggression can be overwhelming to the Kundalini individual's wide-open nervous system. Some people find that it helps to visualize psychic barriers or protective seals (such as surrounding oneself with a cocoon of light) to fend off this barrage.

2. Fear: a certain amount of fear is typical of the transformational process and can't be helped. But there are resources that can modify our fears. I have often found comfort and reassurance from reading books and magazine articles written by others who have undergone psychospiritual experiences. Better yet can be direct communication with others who are going through spiritual emergence. This can be done through networking and forming support groups in your area. Some people find that this is the time when therapy is of great help, especially when dealing with all the personal and biographical pain that is uncovered during the purification process.

3. Loneliness. While people from all walks of life are reporting spontaneous awakenings, it can still be hard to personally locate someone who has had a Kundalini experience. We still hear from people who were alone with their experiences for years, not knowing a single other soul who had any idea what Kundalini was. The situation is improving through the networking provided by various organizations, including SEN's "compassionate Listener" program, Shared Transformation's "Friends Online," and the Internet Kundalini mail list, all of which make it easier for individuals going through spiritual emergence to reach out to one another.

3. Physical illness. Going through a spiritual transformation doesn't make you immune to "normal" diseases and injuries. If you are experiencing extreme or prolonged symptoms, do seek medical attention. A Kundalini awakening can catalyze latent diseases, which can be serious if left untreated. Dr. Yvonne Kason, who specializes in treating Kundalini patients, has found that in addition to the common symptoms, people undergoing Kundalini are more prone to certain diseases than the average person: "These include respiratory allergies, skin contact allergies, food allergies, food sensitivities, hypoglycemia, diabetes mellitus, and thyroid disorders."

4. Mild to moderate difficulties. Some people never experience severe complications during their awakening. Others may go through "intermissions" of relative relief between bouts of more drastic manifestations. In these less demanding periods, it can be very helpful to channel the

energies into creative outlets, such as writing poetry, playing music, artwork, or whatever you are naturally drawn to do. These activities are not only pleasant; they can be a way to process and integrate unconscious (and superconscious) material.

Nutrition

"The main guideline to developing our diet is our inner experience of the Kundalini or simply that, while eating or after eating, our body-mind complex should feel energized and good throughout the day." -Gabriel Cousens

"Listen to your body" is the message I've reiterated when counseling others, and the message that has been stressed again and again in my own process. Despite this, there have been times when I've had considerable resistance to following my own advice. This has been particularly true when it comes to nutrition.

My problem has been my indoctrinated ideas about what constitutes a healthy diet. When my body has needed fresh fruits and vegetables, I've had no trouble obliging it, since I was a vegetarian long before my Kundalini awakening. But when my system violently rejected what I considered to be a good, balanced menu, I was concerned. During these times, I subsisted on a seemingly non-nutritive mono-diet of nothing but blueberry muffins and cereal with milk and honey. Yet any deviation from this fare would bring on nearly instantaneous diarrhea. You'd think I would learn after several bouts of this sort, but no, I kept trying to add "wholesome" foods even while my body was making it very clear to me that these were not digestible at the time.

It did immensely help me that Gopi Krishna, lacking our own "scientific" cultural bias, regarded milk, butter, dried fruits and "sugary substances and cereals" as "all nourishing and purifying articles of food," and described how important these foods were to his own well-being during the purgation period of his awakening. It dawned on me that these types of foods fall into the category described in yogic literature as sattvic. Dairy foods, grains, fruits and sweets are all considered highly sattvic. The yogis believe that eating certain types of food produce specific states of consciousness. Sattvic foods are said to promote the most spiritual level of bodily vibrations.

I think the converse is true: when the bodily vibrations are at a certain level, only sattvic food can be tolerated. Glenn Morris speaks of the Kundalini awakening of his ninjutsu master, whose digestive system rejected everything but rice and yogurt, which he lived on exclusively for eighteen months.

Other people have told me of similar needs for these foods. One woman in the midst of a Kundalini awakening told me, "I'm hungry all the time. I'm eating tons of cheese and dried fruit and honey..." She was surprised at her ravenous appetite for these specific foods. At certain phases of my process, I found myself craving sweets and dairy products -- cheesecake in particular. Another woman told me she was downing gallons of ice cream and couldn't get enough cheese. A metaphysical teacher who went through a long and severe Kundalini

awakening found that drinking lots of milk is very soothing to the system. She now recommends this for others going through this process.

The craving for sweets seems to correspond to intense energy vibrations in the body. Hypoglycemia can occur during these high-energy states. I found that if I didn't heed these cravings, I would experience sudden and acute reactions. Like a diabetic in insulin shock, I'd become irritable, dizzy, confused and rapidly hostile and hysterical until I drank some fruit juice. Having no medical history of such episodes, these radical behavior shifts were unnerving for both Charles and I. I soon learned never to ignore my hunger.

Cravings for high protein foods are also typical for Kundalini awakenings. I had been a vegetarian for over fifteen years, but there were times during my Kundalini process when I had an insatiable need for fish and poultry. I haven't had cravings for red meat, but I've heard that this is also common, even for previously devout vegetarians.

Numerous people who were meat eaters prior to risen Kundalini eventually develop an aversion to, and inability to digest flesh foods. Nutritional needs also seem to move in cycles. I went through a period where I craved eggs, then into a long stretch where they were completely indigestible, then back again to needing and being able to assimilate them without problems. Digestive disturbances predominate in some people's Kundalini process for years, with the system so fickle one never knows from one day to the next what the body will accept.

I've had periods when I was voraciously hungry and times when I was indifferent to food. For stretches of time, I was hungry but could barely eat. When my throat chakra was blocked for three months, I felt strangled all the time and could swallow nothing but liquid. I also had difficulty eating when the energy was in my mouth, causing my tongue to spontaneously move in strange and uncontrollable ways. When Kundalini moves into the face, some people suffer long periods of "lockjaw", which prohibits eating. When the energy is strongest in the stomach and abdominal area, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea can become a problem. Weight loss is common during these phases of awakening. Weight gain is also frequent during the voracious eating stages. And those who are prescribed psychoactive medications generally experience weight gain as a side effect. This is an especially difficult issue for women in our current anorexic-adoring culture. When the process makes us insatiably hungry, many women try to fight these urges out of fear of eating too much and becoming fat. This is as much a mistake as trying to eat what we think is correct rather than what our bodies are telling us to eat. I have found that any "feast" episodes in which I put on pounds are shortly followed by "famines" in which I shed weight rapidly.

What's more surprising is that weight gain and loss also occur independently of food intake. A woman who could take nothing but water for several weeks was amazed to find that her weight did not change at all. There were periods when my own weight went up and down like a yoyo, regardless of how much or what kinds of food I was consuming. At times, I've registered a ten-pound difference from one day to the next. Sometimes, when I've felt sure I must be putting on weight, I've been astonished to find I was losing it, and vice versa. For awhile, I thought my bathroom scale must be defective. Then I began hearing from others who reported the same phenomena.

Because I've had specific food cravings at many points in my process, I let myself be led by these in choosing what to eat. The body gives me clear messages about what nutrients it needs at the moment. I've never yet had digestive or other physical problems when I've succumbed to my food cravings, no matter how peculiar they've seemed. Conversely, ignoring the craving, or trying to select an appropriate meal according to my dietary theories of what's good for me, has caused havoc.

My choice in foods, like every other facet of my personality, has undergone remarkable alterations. Many foods I used to eat regularly before my Kundalini awakening have little appeal to me now. And foods which are now my staples are those I rarely ate previously. In her book *Shakti Woman*, Vicki Noble tells of a similar shift: "I used to be able to abuse my body with alcohol, sugar, and meat without direct, felt consequences. But once I began the purification process of awakening to the energy, releasing the toxins and negativity from my past, and channeling greater healing power, it became impossible to eat fast foods without getting immediate diarrhea or to drink wine without headache or to eat too much sugar without the back of my neck seizing up in a spasm."

Spiritual Nutrition

Giving thanks for everything I eat is, to me, an important spiritual element of nutrition. Some say that blessing food supplements and medications before taking them will make them more effective. Whether or not this is true, I find this a beautiful idea. Giving our blessings and gratitude for all that comes to us keeps alive our reverence for life. The alternative medicine expert, Dr. Andrew Weil, says that "nutrition in its broadest sense has to do with everything taken into yourself, everything you associate with and what influence that has on you." When we are being transformed, we become much more aware of all the things that are nourishing or toxic to us on all levels. Our old routines, habits, attitudes, activities and associates no longer suffice. In everything we do, in every dimension of our beings, we are being refined and restored to our Original Wholeness.

Who Can We Tell?

Trying to explain our situation to people who have no knowledge of Kundalini is like trying to explain the desert to a fish. The dynamics of Kundalini fly in the face of so many consensual reality beliefs that people think we are talking lunacy. When I am asked how Kundalini experiences can be broached in a way that will be acceptable to one's neighbors and friends, I am tempted to advise: "Tell them you have malaria!"

Genevieve Lewis Paulson, whose Kundalini awakening was not so severe as to prevent her from working, said that rather than offer "long definitions and treatises," she told friends and co-workers that her symptoms were due to "menopause and low-blood sugar." This explanation was not entirely untrue in her case, since she "was of menopausal age, after all, and did have some low-blood sugar problems." Throughout my life, I've experienced psychic and spiritual phenomena which, with the exception of a few carefully chosen confidants, I had kept to myself. Since these experiences were primarily of an interior nature, and had no visible effect on my body or my behavior, these secrets were not hard to conceal. But when my Kundalini arose, it

was no longer possible to pretend that nothing out of the ordinary was going on. Where my previous unusual experiences comprised a small portion of my life, Kundalini monopolizes my life. It is not something I can keep in the closet while carrying on an ostensibly "normal" daily life.

Still, not everyone connected to me knows the truth about my situation. Relatives who keep in touch with my mother have been told I am suffering from a strange illness my doctors have been unable to diagnose. (From my doctors' viewpoint, this is true.) To my neighbors, I am some kind of eccentric recluse with health problems. (This also is not far removed from the truth.)

Yet even these unsuspecting neighbors have not been spared some of the wilder paranormal manifestations of the riproaring Kundalini. During the most spectacular period of my process, the elderly couple next door (who had no inkling of my condition) asked Charles, who is an electronics engineer, if he knew what might be causing a very peculiar "malfunction" in their TV set. With considerable embarrassment (and fear that we might consider them crazy), they told him that for the past week, the set had been turning itself on full volume in the middle of the night! They hoped Charles might be able to offer some mechanical explanation for this bizarre development.

Charles told me he almost replied, "Maybe it has something to do with my wife." Instead, he discretely answered that he knew of no logical explanation for the phenomena. (These were two very conservative, Methodist-Republican senior citizens who were not likely to find reassurance in the discovery that they were residing next door to a human psychic-power-dynamo!)

During this same period, Charles and I had gone to a bookstore to see if we could find any books on Kundalini. The clerk asked us if we had read Gopi Krishna's biography. We told her that we had. "Isn't it incredible what he went through?" she asked us. "It's hard to imagine such a thing." We both smiled and nodded. Little did she know it was all I could do to keep my arms held stiff at my sides to prevent them from going into sweeping mudras. In *The Stormy Search for the Self*, Christina and Stanislav Grof observe: "Spiritual disciplines have varying attitudes about whether people should talk about their inner journey. Some schools believe that it detracts from the power of the experience to talk about it and that such discussion may lead to undesirable traits such as pride... Other traditions encourage expression, however limited, as a way to integrate these inner states into daily life. By talking about your experiences with people who understand, you will further comprehend what happened to you."

Overall, they advise that it is safest to confide only in "people who are receptive -- someone who has been through a similar process, a knowledgeable therapist or spiritual teacher, or a support group." While it can be very helpful to discuss our visions and mystical experiences with trusted advisors, Native Americans such as the holy man Medicine Grizzlybear Lake warn that it is best to wait at least a year before openly sharing such things. Indiscriminate sharing can dissipate the power of these experiences.

I did tell my closest family members and friends the truth about my situation. Yet even among the most receptive and open-minded, there was misunderstanding. One person thought I had deliberately decided to precipitate a Kundalini awakening. Appalled that I would initiate such a

dangerous undertaking, she tried to talk me out of it. Another imagined Kundalini to be some kind of tantric sexual practice. Some assumed that I was using a religious metaphor to help me cope with my terrible disease. Several feared that I had lost my mind under the strain of my illness. Initially, my sister was afraid that I was in denial about an undiagnosed manic-depressive disorder, and my son asked me if having a risen Kundalini meant that I was now a "pagan."

Repeatedly, people undergoing transformation remark that they find little tolerance or real knowledge of the Kundalini process even among their most spiritually oriented acquaintances. Unless someone is personally undergoing the process, or has read a substantial amount of authentic literature on this phenomena (or has been in close, constant contact with someone experiencing transformation), it's a good bet they won't have a clue as to what you are saying. I solved the problem by sending nearly a dozen copies of Bonnie Greenwell's *Energies of Transformation* and half a dozen of Lee Sannella's *The Kundalini Experience* to family members and friends who were valiantly struggling to comprehend me.

Many of those I know who are involved in lengthy transformation processes have simply given up trying to explain it to anyone. Some who are undergoing unmistakable Kundalini awakenings won't even use the word Kundalini anymore, so weary are they of being misunderstood. For years, I managed to avoid mentioning anything about Kundalini to my doctors for fear if I did, they would not only dismiss what I said, but would likely diagnose me as some kind of neurotic/hypochondriac space case and stop taking my legitimate medical needs seriously. When my spine injury forced me to seek medical help, I first saw a general practitioner. When she witnessed my kriyas, I explained that this was a lingering neurological condition that previous physicians said might be the result of a virus. (Not the whole truth, but true enough.) She sent me to a neurologist; again, on the examining table, my legs jerked spastically several times. The neurologist assumed this was because I was in pain and tense; he told me to "just relax." (Actually, the more relaxed I am, the more vigorous the kriyas. I did the opposite and tensed up; the kriyas subsided.)

Sometimes it seems as if the Spirit wants to be known, and pushes us into situations where telling is unavoidable. After eleven months of relentless back pain, my neurologist became insistent that I switch from a very small daily dose of codeine to antidepressants for pain relief. I had told him previously that I did not want to take these drugs because there was "too much controversy" surrounding them, but he wouldn't let it go at that. He kept questioning me as to why I was so dead set against taking these medications. Finally, I broke down and confessed to him that I was in the midst of a Kundalini awakening, and that antidepressants were known to be antagonistic to the process. I said that I knew it sounded weird, and that I was very uneasy talking about this because I knew that others who revealed their condition to their doctor were met with disbelief and hostility -- and in some cases, a refusal to provide further medical care.

Much to his credit, although he was skeptical, my neurologist did not berate me, and was willing to drop the argument. It helped that I was able to tell him that the DSM-IV (issued by the American Psychiatric Association and relied upon by mainstream doctors and therapists) has accepted the new category of spiritual emergence! In a March '93 memo, SEN told its members of this groundbreaking medical recognition of the mind/body/soul connection: "Because any diagnosis that appears in the manual must be included in medical school training, physicians and

therapists will be educated on the subject." (A standing ovation for doctors Robert Turner, David Lukoff and Francis Lu for working hard to get this category recognized!) Who and how and when to tell are not easy decisions -- and, as in my experience with my doctor, the decision is not always in our own hands. I have been wonderfully blessed in having a husband with whom I can share the whole of my truth, and with connecting to others who not only understood, but who were experiencing many identical manifestations to mine in their own emergence process.

People experiencing Kundalini difficulties are one of the most socially disenfranchised of all groups, in large part because they are not only invisible to the culture, but also invisible to each other and, when not understanding the spiritual nature of their process, estranged from themselves. Surrounded by a collective negating voice that intermittently speaks through friends, family, associates, doctor, minister, alternative healer, swami, roshi, etc., the individual is constantly told that her Kundalini experiences simply cannot (or should not) be happening.

Of all the demeaning forms of prejudice, aspersion that categorically denies the validity of one's experiences is most undermining. Even blatant hatred is not so corrosive to one's sense of self-trust. This is why networking and forming support groups is so important for Kundalini initiates. When we know others who are in the same boat, it is far easier to withstand onslaughts of the immense forces of ignorance. This is not simply a matter of having some chums to trade tales with. People's lives have been badly damaged through inappropriate medical treatments, poor "spiritual" instruction, and an overall lack of personal understanding of the transformational process.

Unless we use discretion, telling the truth about our Kundalini experiences may get us branded as liars or weirdoes, jeopardizing our jobs, reducing our standing in the community and threatening our survival. But gradually the social climate is warming up to the mysteries of the Spirit. Up until recent times, admitting to a telepathic or precognitive experience, or to making contact with the "ghost" of a loved one who had died, were met with blank stares and serious question about one's sanity. Now these and stranger things are featured topics on popular TV talk shows. If, as it seems, the planetary vibration of the Aquarian Age is inducing ever increasing incidents of spontaneous spiritual awakening, perhaps not too far in the future, there will be so many of us and enough honest discussion of these experiences that we all will feel free to speak openly of such things.

Blessing or Curse?

In the overall sense, what may help or hinder us most is our regard for the process itself. Both the energetic activity in the body and the psychic deluge from awakening chakras create a strong impression of internal "otherness." Women who have borne children are familiar with this physical and mental/emotional intimacy with the "other" within. In fact, many of the Kundalini manifestations bear resemblance to the flutterings and stirrings and even the bold kicks and contortions of the infant in the womb. If we are able to welcome this inundation of more-than-self into our bodyminds, the process is far easier to bear than when we recoil in horror at the seemingly alien invasion. Transpersonal psychotherapist Bonnie Greenwell, who works with clients undergoing spiritual emergence, has commented: "If Kundalini awakens and one is

contracted against the consciousness it brings, it appears that nothing of value can happen, although much struggle may still occur."

I have witnessed this in several individuals who furiously fought against the difficulties of their awakening process. Not only was this negation futile in preventing further symptoms; by taking an adversarial stance, they denied themselves the one thing that might have made their pain endurable: a sense of purposefulness.

In my case, some part of me must have been secretly awaiting this stage of my development in great anticipation, because as soon as I accepted I was experiencing the risen Kundalini, I was overcome with joy, reverence and gratitude. Such immediate readiness to receive the process as a gift is unusual. Most people need a bit more reflection and evidence before they can believe that the painful symptoms and losses incurred during the cleansing period are actually preludes to profound healing and regeneration.

"During and for a period of time after the awakening, it may be quite hard to accept the reality of the Kundalini," points out Tontyn Hopman (who worked closely with Gopi Krishna). He sympathizes with those who are "going through a turmoil of both beatific and upsetting visionary or synchronistic experiences," and want "nothing more than to return to the old, uncomplicated state and have nothing more to do with the new situation." Hopman suggests that we try to humbly "live with, even for, the new energy in us," and if possible, to surround ourselves "with persons with whom we have a harmonious and loving relationship." More exuberantly, Vicki Noble encourages us "to keep a sense of excitement and joy about the process, to affirm the actual sensations of life-force and passion that are flooding through the body... Trust the basic goodness of the process, the positive direction of the high-voltage healing energies."

Yet even with such a rallying attitude, those of us who accept the benevolence of the transformational experiences may still face episodes that shake our faith. There have been countless times when I seriously doubted I would survive my process intact. Yet even in my most harrowing moments, I have been sustained by my gratitude. Going through severe illness and staggering losses brings everything into razor sharp perspective. Either one remains teetering on a precipice of bitter resentment, or one gains a deep appreciation of every aspect of one's existence, which is not wracked in pain and sorrow. Genuine gratitude is a reward unto itself. Even in the throes of devastation, it fills us with a sense of the holiness of life. Gratitude is the recognition that Something here is touching us with Love. This is such a joyful release from the egocentric and self-torturing belief that Something here owes us a good life, or that any painful experience is a sign of punishment or personal failure.

I'm afraid I'm starting to sound moralistic here, which isn't my intention. I don't think feeling thankful can be taught as a spiritual virtue; it arises by itself when enough inner debris has been cleared away. I think it is crucial to remember that each of us has our own innate style, our own exquisite relationship to the whole that no one else can spell out for us. The transformational process reveals to each of us the best way to embrace and be embraced by all that comes to us. Finding this way for ourselves is our personal search for the grail. The qualities of character stressed by many spiritual teachers as essential to completing transformation are courage, faith

and not least of all, a good sense of humor. More succinctly, what helps most is to take heart, keep searching, and keep watching.

Chapter 11

HELP OR HYPE?

"There is a growing number of people in the West who are experiencing Kundalini with much confusion, and turning to medical, psychiatric, parapsychological and new-age healing facilities which are not oriented to or experienced in the handling of the Kundalini process." -- Ajit Mookerjee

As each person's process develops, they are led through synchronicities, dreams, or seemingly fortuitous accidents to the teachers, helpers and resources they need. Sometimes these helpers appear in our lives as a formal guru or spiritual teacher and sometimes in less obvious ways. While those whose own Kundalini awakening was supervised by a spiritual teacher usually stress the necessity for this kind of guidance, many people have successfully completed their process without such help. As Swami Muktananda says: "When Kundalini awakening takes place through grace, it will rise of its own accord, and become established where it should be established. Kundalini will take care of Herself, for the Shakti is a conscious and all-knowing power." Like many of us who have experienced Kundalini's innate intelligence firsthand, the philosopher, Claudio Naranjo, shares this belief: "The Kundalini energy involves a guiding principle, so that the process of personal development from there on becomes rather autonomous and spontaneous."

People whose knowledge of Kundalini rests entirely on religious doctrine or healing theories often believe they fully understand the process and are quick to judge experiences which are not in accord with what they "know" of Kundalini. These are often the people who believe a guru can (and always does) lead devotees through painless awakening, or that an adept healer can easily balance the patient's Kundalini through medicinal herbs, prescribed diets or "energy work." Such individuals often regard the physical, mental and emotional difficulties of Kundalini awakening as "atypical" and as demonstration of the hazards of a poorly guided process. But from all the firsthand Kundalini accounts I have heard, with and without the external assistance of a guru or healer, it seems that to the contrary, it is completely trouble-free and painless transformation that is atypical.

Since the world is amuck with people claiming knowledge, skills and powers they hardly possess, finding someone with answers to our spiritual questions or who may be able to help us with our Kundalini troubles can be an exasperating search. Our Kundalini difficulties often lead us on a wild goose chase through the ranks of medical, psychological, spiritual, metaphysical and alternative practitioners whose appraisals of our condition (and recommendations for treatment) miss the mark by miles.

Friends, family and acquaintances that do not understand our predicament may assail us with inappropriate advice. Most people do mean well; they genuinely want to help. All the same, good intentions are no substitute for knowledge. Too many people -- especially those professing to be spiritual counselors or healers -- overestimate their expertise in matters of health and spiritual well being.

Dead-end Doctors

At some point in the process, most of us have sought help from the medical profession. Unfortunately, traditional health workers who are familiar with and able to recognize symptoms of psychospiritual crisis are almost as hard to find as Bigfoot.

I know firsthand that Kundalini awakening can be alarming, especially if one has no idea what's going on. At the onset of my own awakening, my own alarming symptoms had me in and out of the hospital for four months, being tested for nearly everything under the sun, including cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Drawing a blank in every direction, my doctors shrugged off my illness as "probably nothing serious" and perhaps caused by an unidentified, lingering virus. But in this I was fortunate. Nearly every one of the specialists who examined and tested me was a kind and sympathetic human being. Many individuals seeking medical help for Kundalini symptoms are not so blessed. Spiritual emergence is such a bizarre and little known process that most M.D.s and too many in the mental health field dismiss it as delusion or mental illness. I have heard repeated stories of callous and contemptuous doctors who, failing to find a medical explanation for the illness, have accused patients of everything from secret drug addiction to hypochondria.

Aside from the ubiquitous virus diagnosis, a common medical catchall is stress. I was initially told that stress was the likely cause of my breathing and swallowing difficulties. A woman concerned about the peculiar vibrating sensation in her body was assured by her doctor that this was simply stress. While there are physicians who believe that stress can trigger physical illness, others seem to use the word the way "psychosomatic" was once intended: "It's all in your head, get over it, nothing is really happening to you."

Often, spiritual emergence patients are misdiagnosed. A young man experiencing typical Kundalini symptoms of convulsive body movements (kriyas), spontaneous vocalizations, and bouts of emotional distress was diagnosed as having simultaneous "sub-epilepsy", Tourette's syndrome, and bi-polar disorder. A woman was told by neurologists that her spontaneous trance states and mystical experiences were seizures. She was put on Dilantin, which did nothing but complicate her problems. Another woman undergoing a lengthy awakening was informed by a doctor that she had "genetic psychosis." For eight years, a man had been having periodic episodes of psychic experiences accompanied by headaches. This pattern is frequently encountered in sixth chakra openings. His psychiatrist irrationally insisted the phenomena (which included hearing beautiful music and celestial voices in his mind) was entirely the result of a head injury he sustained six years into this process!

Those in the midst of difficult transformation may be coerced into taking psychoactive medications. Although short-term use of these drugs may be necessary for those in extremely disassociative altered states (particularly if they are in danger of harming themselves or others), in most instances, these medications are not required. Many people have told me that such drugs have prolonged, complicated and even worsened the difficulties of their process. (See more on this in Chapter Fourteen.)

Lost in the Maze

The metaphysical and alternative healing fields are more likely to acknowledge the possibility of spiritual emergence, yet even here, genuine firsthand knowledge of these processes is meager. When my doctors were unable to find a medical cause for my illness, I sought other help. Although I was not yet consciously aware that my Kundalini had risen, I strongly suspected spiritual factors were involved. I went to three different psychics who gave me three different explanations for my sickness -- none of them accurate. Because I mentioned to one of these psychics that I was still awaiting the results of medical tests for possible autoimmune diseases, she proclaimed in the reading that my symptoms were attributable to -- surprise -- an autoimmune disease. She told me this was caused by a depletion of my life force. (Only later, when I learned that risen Kundalini greatly increases life force energy, could I appreciate the colossal inaccuracy of her statement.) Another said my illness was psychosomatic, stemming from my "fear of my feminine nature." He sent my heart into my throat by confidently declaring that my illness would destroy my marriage. He predicted Charles would leave me within the year.

Charles had actually suspected Kundalini before I was willing to seriously consider that this could be causing my physical problems. I asked this male psychic point blank, "Could my illness possibly be due to Kundalini? My husband thinks it might." To which he emphatically replied, "No, you have a psychological condition. There are no spiritual connections." (This ought to have made me immediately suspicious of his skills, since I know there are no illnesses without some spiritual significance. But I was too anxious for an explanation for my condition to analyze what he was telling me.)

Once I knew for certain that it was Kundalini, I paid an astrologer to help me interpret possible obstacles I sensed from what I could see of my upcoming transits. He told me I was finished with my Kundalini process and nothing of further impact was on the horizon. As it turned out, the transits coincided with major health crises for me (although I doubt even a more perceptive astrologer could have helped me avert them). But all was not in vain. As it turned out, my desperation-driven trek into the world of soothsayers and stargazers was an eye-opener. I had never before consulted a professional astrologer, and had little experience with psychics, beyond a few \$10, five-minute readings by neo-gypsies at street fairs. My lack of patronage of practitioners of these arts had nothing to do with skepticism; I simply had never been able to afford them. Amazing how fast budget constraints fly out the window when one's life is on the line. And while I am still steamed by the psychic who charged me \$125 for an hour's reading in which the only clairvoyant pronouncement she came up with was that I had borne two children, she and the rest of them unwittingly precipitated a healing I had not known I needed. I was cured of my long-standing mis-assumption that my intuition and self-taught astrology skills were far inferior to that of the "professionals."

In all fairness, I should say that although the third psychic was also off the mark on many of her impressions. She scored a hit when she added, "I am not sure how this is going to happen, but somehow this illness is going to clearly reveal to you the presence of God in your life. That is one of its main functions."

As I began to seek specific information to help me understand and cope with Kundalini, I came up against a glut of occult, esoteric, metaphysical and other material, which was often worse than useless. In my early attempts to find a therapist who was knowledgeable, everyone I spoke with made it obvious that he/she hadn't an inkling of what I was experiencing. Several, however, claimed to be informed about Kundalini. One made a point of stressing a book she relied on exclusively in her work with spiritual emergence clients. I already owned this book and had read it several times; it touched upon Kundalini experiences, but its scope fell far short of what I was encountering in my process. When I tried acupressurists and other healers, I came up against the same wall. From the tone of several of their voices, I could sense they thought I must be some kind of weird-cult fanatic.

One might imagine that gurus, swamis, roshis and other adepts of Eastern religions would be the perfect resource for help in navigating the choppy seas of spiritual emergence. In my experience, and from innumerable reports I've received from others, this has not often been the case. Of the hundreds of therapeutic, alternative and holistic health, psychological, metaphysical, New Age and spiritual groups and organizations to whom we mailed letters explaining the purpose of Shared Transformation newsletter, the ones I imagined might respond with some words of wisdom or kindly advice were the ashrams, yoga and meditation centers, and other Eastern religious organizations. As it turned out, no other group was as unresponsive as the Eastern religious community.

One Western woman whom we had not solicited (and who had declared herself a guruji after her Kundalini awakening) did contact us to give us instructions for referring new students to her. I wrote back, thanking her for her interest and saying that although we did not make referrals, she was welcome to list her name in our "Confidants" column. Confidants, I explained, were individuals with firsthand Kundalini experience who volunteered their support through mail or phone to those in need of an understanding friend to help them weather the process. We never heard from this guruji again.

Religious leaders can be quite territorial about matters of the spirit, and may refuse to acknowledge the awakening process when it occurs outside their select sphere of influence. Eastern exponents rival the most judgmental and wildly proselytizing Christian fanatic when it comes to pushing their conceptions of Kundalini or the teachings of Baba so-and-so. Even one of Muktananda's students was reprimanded by another swami who happened to observe the student's autonomous yoga movements. "Brother, I am warning you," the swami told him, "I have attained full samadhi and what you are doing has nothing to do with it. You'll either go crazy within a short time or die." (This dire prophecy proved wholly false.) And when the Christian contemplative Bernadette Roberts sought a Zen master to help her understand her transcendent ego-dissolution experiences, he could not believe her capable of having the experiences because she was untrained in Zen and thus "too ordinary, and too common."

Inept Advisors

Trying to find someone who really knows how to work with Kundalini can be exasperating. Even with my membership in SEN and KRN, I have had no luck in this department. When my back pain was most agonizing, I called everywhere before I was given a referral to a body

worker who assured me that she had taken courses in working with the Chakras and Kundalini. In my desperation for help, I had a session with her in which she "slowed down the energy" and "raised" my "vibration" (which is in itself a contradiction), and in the process, made my injured spine hurt considerably worse. Although I tried to reserve judgment in the faint hope that increased pain was part of the fabled "healing crisis," the only change in "vibration" I noticed in myself was outrage at having allowed her to lay her hands on me.

While the situation is slowly improving, there are still relatively few people who know much about psychospiritual transformation. Those who think they know are rarely as well informed as they imagine. Whenever there is public discussion of Kundalini difficulties, someone is sure to pop up and proclaim that such-and-such an occult practice, guru, religion, or esoteric healing technique is the true panacea, which will solve all Kundalini problems. The moment anyone guarantees his system/method/nostrum is 100% safe and effective, a red flag goes up in my mind. Nothing in life carries this kind of guarantee, and no responsible healer or counselor would make such a claim.

This seems to be a problem universally encountered in countries caught up in the New Age movement. In a 1995 report issued by Denmark's Kundalini - Network Information, they told of being "overrun with various alternative therapists and healers, all claiming authority on the subject," but all but a few guilty of gross "exaggeration and overestimation" of their talents and grasp of the Kundalini process.

In indigenous cultures there were occasional charlatans whose boasts of special powers, wisdom and healing abilities were bogus, but they were soon found out and lost their credibility. These impostors turned up with increasing frequency, as anthropologist A.P. Elkin observed, during times of "tribal and cultural disintegration, when cunning persons might think there is an opportunity to gain some position of privilege." As Elkin pointed out, even the authentic Shamanic practitioners were susceptible to corruption by "unthinking and credulous white men" who would "encourage the medicine man to play on their desire for mystery" with offers of money.

Our current social situation of transitional upheaval invites this same kind of exploitation. In our isolate society, where clients and students of various practitioners have little chance of meeting with each other to compare notes, community accountability is lost. I suspect this situation may be remedied as the Internet becomes more widely available, just as online patient support groups are springing up to provide a long absent monitoring of mainstream medical practices. It will not be licensing and regulatory boards, but shared anecdotal stories from pleased or angry customers that, like in times of old, will weed out the genuine healers and teachers from the frauds.

Too many ersatz experts have narrowly preconceived ideas about what spiritual experiences are, or how they should manifest. A woman who was experiencing a wide spectrum of Kundalini phenomena, including occasions where she was bodily levitating, was informed that she could not have an awakened Kundalini because she was not experiencing heat in her body. Others, clearly undergoing Kundalini awakenings, were told they were not in a Kundalini process for equally dogmatic reasons: they had no guru; they were not sitting in a lotus position when the

process began; they did not follow the "correct" spiritual practices or doctrine; they had not attained an instant state of bliss or enlightenment; the energy was not moving in the "right" direction; the process was taking far too long; there should be no experience of pain on any level, and so forth.

Too often, people are given blanket formulas, such as being told to eat red meat and sweets (when this is not appropriate to their present biochemical needs), or to exercise heavily (when they are too sick, weak or exhausted to do so). This can be confusing and even damaging to the person who acts on this advice. Those whose own process was overseen by a spiritual teacher usually insist that such a teacher is necessary, adding to the fear and insecurity of those whose paths do not include an external Big Brother to watch over them. New Age advisors who are moralistic and judgmental compound guilt, fear and self-doubt for the person in spiritual crisis. Instead of being given help to deal with her fears, a woman struggling through terrifying psychic plunges was coldly reprimanded by her healer, who told her she was to blame for this because "You create your own reality."

Over-confident healers present another hazard. We have heard from quite a few people whose Kundalini was unwittingly triggered by body-workers, chiropractors, and other practitioners. Many of these health workers underestimate the magnitude of the forces they are dealing with, and are at a loss to offer assistance to their client once the Kundalini has been unleashed.

Understandably, former clients and patients feel angry and betrayed by healers who visited upon them a rash of Kundalini disturbances. While the healer or bodyworker may have freed up channels (in some cases, releasing too much energy too fast), I doubt these people are causing Kundalini to erupt in their patients. It is not so easy to rouse dormant Kundalini; most people who deliberately attempt Kundalini awakening are unsuccessful. I suspect that whatever problem prompted the individual to seek the healer's help in the first place was, in fact, the early rumblings of an emerging Kundalini. The bodyworker or healer may have served as a catalyst for the massive energy release, but unconsciously and unknowingly, the patient/client was already moving toward spiritual awakening. The healer simply gave the process an unexpected boost. Some healers believe that every bodily problem can be ameliorated by transmitting energy to the patient, but anyone with an extremely active Kundalini already has more energy than he/she can handle. The last thing such a person needs is additional life-force energy! Quite a few people experiencing Kundalini awakening have told me that after being given energy by healers, they suffered at drastic intensification of their symptoms. The adage "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing" could be updated to "A little skill in energy-transference is a dangerous thing." In *The Black Butterfly*, Richard Moss tells of a father with an activated Kundalini who was regularly giving energy to his friends and family through prolonged hugging. This practice inadvertently catalyzed a serious eye disease in this man's five year old son. (The disease went into remission once the father realized his error and stopped flooding the child with energy.)

While it is true that yin (energy-deficient) conditions can be helped by channeling more energy into the system, the yang (energy-excess) conditions are worsened by such treatment. Many healers know how to effectively transfer energy, but not all know when or why this would not be appropriate, and fewer still can accurately distinguish between a yin and yang imbalance.

After I suffered an immediate increase in pain -- and no discernible improvement in my Kundalini symptoms -- in the aftermath of treatments from three different body-workers, I decided to stay away from them altogether. This is not to say that anyone whose Kundalini has risen must avoid healers, body-workers or spiritual advisors! I also know of people whose Kundalini difficulties were greatly relieved by such practitioners. The important thing is to be very discerning. There is a wide range of modalities and specialists whose techniques and skills can be of assistance. Healers, therapists, teachers and other facilitators who are familiar with Kundalini and who are respectful and sensitive both to the client and to the energies can help immensely.

People suffering from Kundalini afflictions have been helped by self-hypnosis, meditation, yoga, bodywork, dietary changes, homeopathic and herbal remedies, art therapy, process work, Chi Kung (aka Qi Gong) practice, transpersonal counseling, Shamanic healing, prayers and much more. What becomes apparent from this spectrum is that there are many ways to approach Kundalini disorders, but no one method which is 100% effective for everyone, nor for the same individual at different stages of the process.

Separating the Wheat from the Chaff

Basically, Kundalini authorities fall into three types:

- (1) People who have had Kundalini experiences themselves;
- (2) Those who have studied read or heard about Kundalini experiences;
- (3) Self-proclaimed "enlightened" but deluded teachers and healers, or
- (3a) The outright con artists who figure that no one really has had a Kundalini awakening anyway, so nobody will catch on that they are fabricating the whole of their expertise on this subject.

The first type can be a joy to behold or a source of disappointment. Those who have had transformational experiences themselves are equipped to give wonderful encouragement and guidance to others. But some among these true graduates turn around and concretize their own process into a litany of "do's and don'ts," like Moses returning with stone tablets from the mountain. Instead of supporting the uniqueness of another's process, these pontiffs attempt to correct anyone who is experiencing transformation differently than they did. The third category - the posers -- is unfortunately rampant. Leaders from various traditions say the proliferation of false teachers has been prophesied as an unavoidable bad element in this epoch of rapid change. Collectively, their spurious and sometimes dangerous teachings add to the general public ignorance of Kundalini awakening.

To me, a spiritual teacher has a sacred calling. For years, it seemed to me that teachers of phony "wisdom" were committing the worst kind of sacrilege, leading gullible seekers astray. It took a long time for me to understand that just as there are false teachers, there are false seekers. There are people who pursue spirituality only if it makes no real demand for inner growth or change.

These individuals are drawn to teachers who ingratiate themselves by presenting nothing that might disturb their students' myopic fantasies or challenge their preconceptions. While I understand this better now, this kind of faux-spirituality still disturbs me, particularly when its advocates disparage the struggles of people engaged in genuine spiritual work.

I have come across a number of purported Kundalini books whose distinguished authors -- therapists, swamis, doctors of metaphysics and so forth -- may understand their own discipline or tradition, but their writing reveals a rote and pitiful knowledge of Kundalini. There are Kundalini classes being taught by occult, metaphysical, New Age and spiritual "masters" who have neither experienced nor studied any authentic literature on Kundalini. Adding to their ranks are the numerous meditation and yoga instructors (including those teaching Kundalini yoga) who haven't the slightest idea how the risen Kundalini manifests and do not recognize classical signs of it in their own students. There seems to be no shortage of people who, after attending a dozen workshops and having some mystical experiences, are convinced they've figured out all there is to know about existence. One wishes these folks would take a vow of secrecy, along with their esoteric-blathering ilk who boast that their self-induced Kundalini awakening was a cinch. (Invariably, they claim to be in possession of secret techniques by which Kundalini can be mastered more easily than whirling a hula hoop.) Since we created our Shared Transformation site on the Internet, we have been regularly hit upon by hard sell types who assure us they have the formula (or magic touch) to set all Kundalini problems aright. They usually swear by the efficacy of Aryurvedic-this and homeopathic-that, of energy-grounding techniques that range from the obvious to the inane, of mind-reprogramming regimes, austere dietary restrictions, carefully spelled out breathing practices and meditation techniques, etc. I am not saying that none of these things have merit; some of them might be quite helpful. But approaching spiritual awakening with a bag full of potions, platitudes and exercises reduces it to a mechanical process instead of acknowledging it as the living, mercurial and deeply personal transformation it actually is.

The idea that all the pain of awakening can be mollified through herbs, pills, massages and the like keeps us from addressing the real inner problems that Kundalini works so hard to unveil. Generally, once Kundalini has risen, we can't get away with Band-Aid solutions for long. Eventually, the deeper issues force themselves upon us in a way we cannot escape. When Kundalini awakens, our experience of life and of our own reality is greatly intensified. Many proffered solutions to Kundalini difficulties, from prescription medications to holistic remedies, are intended to reduce the intensity of the process. We may eagerly reach for these nostrums in the mistaken belief that intensity is in itself an unhealthy state. Yet peak intensity is where the greatest breakthroughs in consciousness -- and concomitant inner healing -- occur.

Letting Nature Lead the Way

"The safest way to channel Kundalini-energy is through deep commitment to transcendental love." -- Nik Douglas

Although they can be helpful, some who come by their knowledge of Kundalini entirely through outside sources are poorly informed. Gopi Krishna lamented these "parrots" who could only

quote information they had read or heard, much of it erroneous and of little use to anyone actually undergoing a Kundalini awakening. For example, Meredith, a woman who was experiencing blissful energy rushes and spiritual visions, could not relate to what she was being told about Kundalini by someone limited to pedagogical descriptions of a snake uncoiling and sending searing heat through the spine as it bored its way through "plugged" Chakras. To Meredith, this sounded like absurd mumbo jumbo, and served only to add to her confusion about her own experiences. Regurgitation of secondhand fact is highly prized in the West. Much of the misinformation and poor counsel afforded by even sincere would-be-helpers arises from our cultural bias toward external authority. It is the nature of patriarchal society to deny its members the validity of their own perceptions. We make the clergy, the doctors, the therapists, the scientists and the scholars the arbitrators of truth. These professionals decide for us which thoughts, feelings and experiences are legitimate and which are delusional, dysfunctional and wrong. For millennia, this was an effective way of creating a theoretically manageable reality. People who would not or could not submit to the official parameters were dismissed as crazy, ignorant or evil and subjected to public humiliation and punishment.

While this system produced a certain degree of order and security for the population at large, it stripped individuals of inner continuity and self-reliance. The modern epidemic of low self-esteem is not so much the result of personal trauma as of an inculcated belief that we cannot trust the counsel of our own bodies and minds. How can I feel confidence in myself when I am continually told that I am mistaken in whatever I know and feel; when I am told, in effect, that my heart and mind are liars?

We are indoctrinated with the idea that what is tangible and outside ourselves is valuable and what is invisible, interior and most creative is rubbish. The body, the indwelling spirit, the intuitive and the psychic are all manifestations of the divine feminine, and trust in the innate wisdom of the feminine is cultural heresy. (Thank God and Goddess, this is gradually changing!) I have been pushed to take yoga classes and do pranayama practices taught by instructors whose sole claim to expertise was the impressive number of years they had been teaching. Never mind that the transcendent intelligence of the arisen Kundalini was already producing involuntary pranayama breathing patterns and spontaneous yoga asanas in my body. From the masculine vantagepoint of mastery-through-will- and-effort, our amazing inborn feminine power is seen as unreliable, amateur, and woefully inadequate. Wisdom hewn from direct experience is generally regarded far inferior to the skills won from academic education and long training supervised by others. Bradford Keeney met a traditional Chinese healer who was very frustrated with this Western approach; when he tried to teach American doctors, "they were more interested in memorizing the acupuncture points than learning to hear the patient's body calling them to a specific spot."

Only in the last decade or so has there been a growing recognition in the West that actions based entirely on ideas, theories, opinions and beliefs (the abstractions of the intellect) are out of synch with the deeper issues of life. Older, more mature cultures were experientially based and revered wisdom acquired through direct participation and intimate observation of life. Only that which we know through the immediacy of our own hands, hearts and bodies is our firsthand truth; the rest is hearsay.

During the intense stages of my process, two people tried to intervene by advising me to "let go" of my experience. This Buddhist emphasis on detachment is a technique designed to quiet the mind so as to invite expansion into an egoless state of higher consciousness. When one is already in the egoless expanded state, there is nothing further to release! Trying to "let go" of the transcendent experience while it is occurring will not make it go away. Furthermore, no matter how uncomfortable these blown out states may feel (and the intensity of them can be hard to bear), trying to push them away or struggling to "come down" from them only increases one's distress.

For a six-week period, I experienced myself, and everything in my environment, as a unified, boundariless, overwhelmingly powerful force field. In this hallowed but blasted-out condition, I was barely able to function, and I wondered if I was going to remain in this expanded state for the rest of my life.

During this phase, I was not experiencing mental or emotional breakdown, nor was I wildly manic or self-inflated. To the contrary, this and other heightened planes of consciousness strip me down to a childlike awe and receptivity. And despite being out of commission (in the sense of being unable to focus on, and attend to, ordinary details of daily living), I felt supremely safe and unafraid while in this heightened state. Eventually and gradually, through no effort on my part, I returned to normal consciousness. Since then, I sometimes find myself shifting into altered states which last anywhere from a few minutes to a few days. I realize now that this fluidic dancing back and forth between ordinary and heightened states of consciousness is a natural part of the process. When encountering difficulties, it's hard enough to be going through psychological or physical pain without the additional wound of being told that one is somehow defective or doing something wrong. The pressure to interpret our distress as evidence of personal dysfunction cannot be overestimated! It comes at us from all directions: from the medical and psychiatric podiums, from religious, New Age and holistic spokesmen, from our neighbors, acquaintances and friends echoing society's contempt for its most vulnerable members. It comes from within us as well, from our loss of self-trust and self-love. The process of spontaneous awakening is not within our conscious control, nor does it easily lend itself to external manipulation. Body-workers, chiropractors, healers, therapists, spiritual counselors and others who are experienced with Kundalini can help open up the body, enabling the energy to flow better, or they can give us support to work through psychological issues that come up. But unwise counsel and self-appointed critics often exacerbate rather than alleviate problems for us.

Maybe I have harped too much on this subject, but I constantly hear this same complaint from others. No one has ever said to me, "My healer (therapist/teacher) was too humble and supportive," or told of a bad reaction due to trusting themselves or Kundalini. I realize that not everyone can or should be as much of a spiritual anarchist as I am, but it is better to err on the side of caution than to unquestioningly submit to regimens that may harm us. As Roberto Assagioli points out, "If the people in the individual's environment are enlightened and understanding, they can help a great deal and spare him much unnecessary friction and suffering." Yet the ignorance and harsh criticisms from others can also be seen as a "test on the path of Self-realization," he tells us. "It teaches a lesson in overcoming personal sensitiveness, and is an occasion for the development of inner independence and self-reliance..."

Like physical gestation, spiritual rebirth happens at its own natural pace. Of course, some of the stages are difficult to endure. But there is no safe way to speed up the process. Once it has begun, even if it has been initiated by spiritual transmission from a guru, it cannot be controlled by the guru because it is not of his/her creation; the guru is only a vehicle for the energy. In birth and rebirth, neither the development of the fetus nor the blossoming of the psyche can be directed by human intervention. In both processes, a far greater intelligence than the limited human ego is at work.

Who Can Help?

When my son became interested in learning martial arts, he was advised by a man who had mastered multiple forms, to sit in on different classes to get a feel for the different arts before deciding which to pursue. More important, he said, was the feeling my son got from the Sensei. I told my son that this man seemed wise. I know from experience that a potentially scintillating course can be ruined by a poor teacher. Conversely, an inspired teacher can make even the most ponderous subject come alive.

This same principle applies to all fields, including healing. The specific practitioner we consult and the remedies that work best for us are as varied and unique as the numbers of us undergoing spiritual emergence. Regardless of the therapy or treatment we seek, the awareness of the healer involved makes all the difference. Whoever we turn to will be more likely to help us if they have a compassionate, responsive, open-minded approach. As the more advanced healers already know, all healing techniques and tools are vehicles for the expression of love. Even invasive methods such as surgery are far more successful when the physician has a warm and positive connection to the patient.

Psychospiritual evolution makes us hypersensitive to the attitudes and psychic emanations of others. We instantly detect an uncentered or mentally harsh or uncaring "vibe." Therapists or healers with these attitudes, no matter what their skills or expertise, are not likely to be of benefit to us. Yet a sensitive and non-judgmental healer or counselor can be a godsend in helping us through painful parts of our journey.

Once the Kundalini has fully risen, it may take years to complete its biological, psychological, and karmic restructuring of our systems. As the mystic Mineda H. McCleave points out, Kundalini "is self-directing and self-healing, and, unmolested, will go in the direction of health." Yet even when we know this, some of us are driven to seek an ever-elusive miracle worker to "fix" us. Many people run themselves ragged trying to find someone who will heal them of the process itself.

B.S. Goel followed this same pattern in his own nineteen-year process. "One has a tendency to run to saints and quacks to seek their help to come out of this trouble," he says. And "...even the assurances of great masters who have themselves passed through this process that no harm would come to the person fail to produce any relief during the 'down' phase." Eventually, Goel says, one comes to terms with what is happening: "One starts understanding this process of 'ups' and 'downs' and knows that no human authority can intervene in it. Partly out of understanding and partly out of helplessness one thus surrenders to it and accepts it emotionally."

No one can heal us of a Kundalini awakening; the Kundalini is itself a healing. It is no coincidence that the yogic model of the winding of Ida and Pingala around the central pillar, the Sushumna, bears a striking similarity to the modern medical symbol of healing, the caduceus, where two entwined serpents wrap around a winged staff. In antiquity, the caduceus was carried by the Greek god Hermes, who guided souls to rebirth in eternal life. From time immemorial, the risen Kundalini and healing have been understood to be an interrelated process.

Finding Our Path

I am sometimes resentful of people but the only time I feel pangs of envy is when I hear about someone who at an early age had a mentor who shared wisdom with them. A mother, grandfather, school teacher, kindly neighbor or even a stranger who by word or example showed them something of the underlying nature of things. Except in books, I knew no one like this until I was nearly forty. The authors of my books provided me with a spiritual companionship that was nowhere to be found in my outer life.

Books have been my ashrams, the places where I go to be initiated into the Mysteries. I have learned from many great souls. The operative word here is "many." But I have not found one teacher I could exclusively hang out with; no osmotic bonding where I received holy transmissions; nobody I could turn to for answers to my Big questions. Either circumstances snatched them or me away before I could get too attached, or the wizard turned out to be of the Oz variety, just a little person behind a facade of flashy stage props. After a number of such disappointments, I began to suspect that I was not meant to find a personal teacher. For some time, I chalked this up to my anomalous destiny, just one of the many flukes of my statistically unlikely life.

Now I've realized that it points to something else. The kind of soul-wrenching loneliness I've felt much of my life is typical of what I call the paradigm-breaking path. It plays out in its highest form in the lives of the great innovators: Lao-tze, the founder of Taoism; Jesus, Buddha. These were among the most pivotal ground-breakers of humanity. In modern times, Carl Jung has been a notable paradigm-breaker. In a much lesser way, I too have broken my teaspoon of ground. Paradigm-breakers are by necessity independent of tradition. Theirs is the untread path, the solitary foray into the wilderness. To the untrained eye they appear to be anarchists, making up their own rules as they go along and heading nowhere fast. Paradigm-breakers learn to test the wind and check the compass of their awareness to know in which direction to move. They hold up everything to the litmus test of their experiences, to their intuition, to their gut-level instincts and to their hearts. Theirs is a journey as venerable as the followers of tradition, but they have less companionship on their travels.

The more familiar path is that of lineage. Lineage's are time-honored avenues to the Spirit, be they Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Wiccan, indigenous or lesser-known trails. The path of lineage and the path of the paradigm-breaker are the two archetypal spiritual routes. Both are equally challenging.

One might argue that shamanism is a lineage, but this is only so within the context of a specific culture. The essence of shamanism pervades all traditions, as does mysticism and Kundalini. (The revelations that accompany the awakening of Kundalini are said to be the foundation of all religions.)

We are presently in the midst of a global birthing of a new lineage, which is an amalgamation of all that has gone before. One might say we are ushering in a tradition of Universalism. It is evidenced in a peculiar thing which has been happening among the wisdom keepers of traditions worldwide. Previously well-guarded spiritual secrets have been deliberately divulged to the general populace.

Northern and Southern Amerindian holy men such as Black Elk, Fool's Crow, Don Juan; the African shamans Malidoma Some and Credo Mutwa; the Sufi guru who told Irina Tweedie to write down every detail of her Kundalini unfolding; Japan's Suzuki Roshi, India's Yogananda: the roster is endless of those who have in recent years directly taught, or spoken to and through anthropologists, journalists and cinematographers.

All who have shared their sacred knowledge have said in effect that the time for privileged information has ended. The need is too great now; too many people are being called to awakening, and too few wise elders remain to continue in the Old Ways. Now this precious heritage of wisdom must be freely dispensed for all who are able to partake of it. The closed hoop of isolate traditions must be enlarged to include everyone, no matter what ancestry or creed. The shift from guarded secrecy to open disclosure is escalating through modern communications technologies. In a way never before possible, the wisdom of the ages is being synthesized and integrated by people from all cultures. Philosophers and mythologists witnessing this change say it portends a collective maturation of the human psyche. We are growing beyond the age of parental teachers because the spirit of the times demands this of us.

We are no longer totally alone. Our new instructors and advisors are more egalitarian than the mentors of the past. They are our peers, our fellow travelers, no less human or more divine than the rest of us. We honor and respect what they share with us without subjugating ourselves to them. And if we remember how we came by our hard won wisdom, we accord others the same courtesy of discovering for themselves what is right for them, rather than announcing that our truth is The Truth.

The days of long apprenticeship to an exclusive teacher seem numbered. When such a guru/chela relationship is not in the cards, one can chase around the world in fruitless search of the right teacher. Those with no outer world guidance or support whatsoever do tend to have a more perilous journey. But help need not come in the form of a teacher or religion. It is said that when asked the nature of the path, a Zen master replied, "Walk on." Wherever our next step takes us is where we are meant to be. Whatever is happening now is the nature of the path. We can't really fall off our own track. We may take occasional detours or seem to wander aimlessly, but this too is part of the path. The Prodigal son finds his way back home, the endless miles in the desert lead to the lush oasis; everything eventually comes around.

Meditation and Other Practices

Reams have been written about the necessity for regular meditation if one is to successfully contain the Kundalini force, and every school I know that teaches how to arouse spiritual energies includes (or entirely depends upon) meditation. I don't know what percentage of people with ascended Kundalini have a formal meditation practice, but I hear from plenty of people who don't. Conversely, thousands of devoted meditators never experience Kundalini awakening.

There are many forms of meditation that are unrecognized as such. When I was healthier, I used walking as my daily meditation. I would go for long walks, and after about an hour at a steady gait, something internal would shift. Perhaps it was akin to the "runner's high." It would be as if something had flipped a switch, and instead of feeling my legs pumping, the walking was coming from a different level. I seemed to effortlessly flow along. I could keep this up for six hours at a time without draining my energy. I thought this was an entirely subjective experience until a friend who knew me well remarked to me, "You don't walk; you float."

These float-walks were a wondrous source of renewal for me, physically, psychologically and spiritually. I mourned having to relinquish them...

Writing has also been a meditative practice for me. Like the walking, it isn't until I've built up a momentum that something else takes over, and my writing becomes something I'm a part of rather than something I'm controlling. The same thing occurs with other arts. "Soulful music is not made by musicians," says Bradford Keeney, "it moves through them." Anything that allows us to become one with life's current is a meditation.

Meditators who have had mild or relatively non-disruptive Kundalini experiences usually claim that meditation eases spiritual awakening. While in some cases this may be true, in others it is not. Of the hundreds of people I have heard from whose risen Kundalini caused serious difficulties, quite a few told me they regularly meditate. Furthermore, many had to stop meditation for extended periods because their Kundalini problems were intensified when they meditated. This was true for Gopi Krishna, who suffered severe consequences when he resumed meditation (albeit excessively) after a several year hiatus.

On the other hand, there are those who have never meditated who have had gentle and predominately positive Kundalini experiences. Because of the incredible, unpredictable twists to this mysterious process, as Charles has more than once remarked, "When it comes to Kundalini, all bets are off."

I have meditated sporadically throughout my life and sporadically throughout my Kundalini process. I had not meditated for years when my Kundalini erupted, nor have I found meditation a failsafe for alleviating the difficulties I have encountered along the way. Prayer seems to be more effective for me. It may be pertinent that I have a curious, introspective and self-interrogating nature. Before and since my Kundalini rose, Charles and I have daily explored our dreams and psyches with various modalities we've learned to enhance our personal growth. Chief among these is a shared, very active, combination psychoanalytical and shamanic method developed by Arnold Mindell which he calls "process work." I mention this as an example of other spiritual

tools and self-exploration methods, which I believe, are commensurate with traditional sedentary, solitary meditation.

Of course, if you feel drawn to meditate, by all means, do so. If it doesn't seem to work for you, you are not doomed, as so many meditation advocates suggest. There is nothing innately holy or magical about meditation; it is just one of many tools to lead you to your center. However, I must caution: practices and techniques recommended to rouse Kundalini can be very risky when the Kundalini is already up and roaring. I am speaking of methods like pranayama (yogic breath-control exercises), Qi Gong, Transformational Breath, rebirthing, Holotropic breathwork, and most formal methods of meditation. These techniques can be healing or destructive, depending on the awareness level of whoever employs them. Excruciating headaches, infernal heat, seizures, extreme anxiety and psychosis have been the price paid by many who learned the hard way to respect Kundalini's natural course. Although any of these afflictions can also occur during an intense Kundalini episode when there has been no interference, the system can rebalance itself more quickly when it is not being stressed by over-stimulating practices.

Controlling the Process

The prevailing but mistaken belief that spirituality is always a positive and uplifting experience does untold harm to those of us enduring the very real agonies of spiritual evolution. Anyone familiar with the histories of the most renowned spiritual luminaries of recent times (Krishnamurti, Swami Muktananda, Padre Pio, Ram Dass, etc.) knows that physical and psychological disturbances are a commonly reported part of the transformational process. Regardless of whether or not Kundalini is active, traditional teachings emphasize that suffering cannot be avoided on the spiritual path. "The spiritual life and its training is hard and crude; it is rough and difficult," Sufi adept Irina Tweedie solemnly admits. "You are humiliated, thrown down; your face is rubbed in the dust and you are beaten to nothing." Those undergoing involuntary Kundalini awakening are not spared these hardships of the path.

The expanded consciousness that is the earmark of the risen Kundalini can be ecstatic or tormenting; either way, it is culturally taboo. Doctors with little or no experience with Kundalini may be convinced that we are suffering from "religious delusions" and try to pigeonhole us with demoralizing psychiatric diagnoses. "Safe and socialized," John Nelson observes, "we are allowed but few deviations from ordinary wakefulness: dreaming sleep, non-dreaming sleep, reverie (daydreaming) alcohol intoxication, sexual orgasm, and, under special circumstances, hypnosis and meditative states. Orthodox Western psychiatry assumes that a person who enters any other [altered state of consciousness] is either high on drugs or seriously mentally ill."

Reading many Eastern tracts, one comes across repeated caveats that unless Kundalini energies are controlled, all hell will break loose. Needless to say, such warnings are chilling to those of us whose Kundalini has risen spontaneously. Upon deeper examination, however, I have found that Eastern and Western ideas of "control" are often very different. Westerners are apt to believe that through some fancy mental jujitsu or application of the will, Kundalini should be forced to operate in a specified way. Eastern teachers who stress control are generally talking about something else. Robert Svoboda's guru Vimalananda, for instance, repeatedly warned him of the dangers of uncontrolled Kundalini arousal. Yet Vimalananda later claims, "For an ordinary

human to control Kundalini is impossible, or nearly so. Only immortals can properly control Her." Since, as he said, almost no one has the strength to control the cosmic force of Kundalini, it is far better to receive Kundalini as a goddess: "Love her like your Mother, and then you will be safe."

I intuitively did so from the moment I realized my Kundalini had risen. While I have not been spared pain (although I suspect my back problems would have surfaced at some point in my life regardless, particularly since I have double scoliosis -- S-curve -- of the spine), my trust and love of Kundalini has benefitted not only myself, but countless others who have turned to me for help.

Vimalananda also advised: "Always, always remember that the supreme method of mind control, the supreme intoxication, is the perpetual repetition of the sweet name of God." From this it is clear that "control," from the Eastern perspective, is not something that can be done from an egoic level. It is rather a recognition of the ego's smallness and helplessness in the brunt of cosmic power, and a corresponding reach for divine protection and guidance in the form of japa or prayer.

When we are in the midst of this profound transformation of our body/minds, unless we are being guided by wise and experienced teachers, it is better to trust the innate intelligence of Kundalini than to attempt to control or push the energies along. I have heard story after story of disastrous results when individuals with awakened Kundalini tried to force the process in any way.

In his account of his Kundalini awakening, Philip St. Romain tells of his spontaneous passive meditations, which deepened until he was "melting into the black hole within." He attended a Jesuit-taught Zen retreat, eager to learn more about what was happening to him. To his disappointment and discomfort, the formal and more aggressive meditation techniques being taught (following the breath, alternate breathing rhythms and so forth) were of no use to him at all. "The net result was a monumental headache," which could only be relieved by returning to his naturally arising practice. Others whose Kundalini has risen have told of similar negative results when trying to follow proscribed meditation practices rather than allowing their inner process to guide them. The idea that a Kundalini awakening is supposed to be a carefully controlled spiritual exercise arises from yogic literature which promotes self-induced (and nearly impossible to achieve) awakening. Those of us undergoing spontaneous emergence know that the process has a life of its own. This does not mean that it has gone amuck! There is a primal intelligence operative in the rhythms and flows of Kundalini.

The majority of the most vital processes in our lives are not ego-controlled (i.e., digestion, respiration, blood circulation, bodily chemistry, etc.), yet we don't find anything objectionable in this. Why, then, do we demand that the far more mysterious superconscious processes conform to our limited ideas of what is healthy and productive? Physical or psychological pain are not irrefutable evidence that something has gone wrong. Childbirth is often very painful; infants suffer pain in teething; hormonal changes during puberty and menopause can be physically and emotionally uncomfortable. Yet all of these are natural and necessary processes.

When I hear someone say they can control their Kundalini, I want to ask: Can you control the course of rivers? Can you control the orbits of the planets? Can you control the force of gravity? I think mastery and control are misconceptions. We become adept at something by learning its nature and approaching it on its terms, not ours. Imagining that we have the upper hand with Kundalini is sheer hubris.

Cooperation is something else altogether. It calls for awareness, respect and basic trust. These can be hard to come by for those of us born and bred in the zeitgeist of a mechanical and hostile - or at best, indifferent -- universe.

Once Kundalini is awake and active in the system, especially when it has awakened spontaneously and the individual does not recognize what is happening, the tendency to fight against it is strong. This can invite new problems. A man who was weary of months of debilitating fatigue (common at certain stages of the Kundalini process) decided to give himself a boost with amphetamines. This was a serious mistake; he catapulted himself into a ten-week bout of psychosis.

Another individual had panic attacks trying to resist the seemingly alien force of Kundalini as it twisted her ribcage and torso into bizarre positions. When she learned that such unusual postures are caused by Kundalini's purposeful inner adjustments to allow the energy to flow freely, she relaxed and allowed the energy to take over. Not only was her fear diminished; she told me that her overall health improved from that point on.

When the Kundalini awakens, tremendous power is unleashed. The resulting expansion of consciousness affects every element of our being, from our biological functions to our personal relationships, to our concept of reality, to our influence in the world. The difficulties of the process are not proof that we are falling apart; they are signs of profound inner growth and change. Although sensitive, aware, and competent healers and counselors can help "midwife" a rebirth, each unique process will still unfold in its own way, at its own pace. "Even with preparation and understanding," says Richard Moss, "the moment of opening is still ineffable and unfathomable and the process of embodiment as original as every man and woman."

When easy and pleasant is the measure of the correct way of things, anything that entails difficulty or discomfort is frowned upon. But nature does not support this view. For instance, baby birds struggle laboriously to hatch from their eggs. Well-intentioned humans who try to lend a hand by peeling away some of the imprisoning shell do the chicks no favor. Helping invariably kills them. This suggests that the birds' exhaustive efforts to enter the world are in some way vitalizing. (Incidentally, birds are archetypal symbols for the soul.)

Our culture has twisted the archetypal hero's journey from a quest for strength and courage to one of brute conquest, just as we have misjudged nature's need to be brought to order. Control is a repeating theme in our social and religious traditions. "Losing control" is regarded a failure of will, while being "in control" is considered mastery. From my experience, the most threatening aspect of the awakening process is not "uncontrolled" Kundalini, but judgment and fear. When we can accept the Spirit's multidimensional dance within us, whether it is a sensual delight or a violent "dismemberment," we enter into a hallowed relationship with awesome forces. When we

ask for -- and heed -- guidance in accord with whatever path or tradition we follow, the awakening process becomes a sacred initiation.

Inflation vs. Honoring Ourselves

One must already have a sense of oneself as a person with boundaries before one can begin to dissolve those boundaries, because the point isn't to end up in a state of mind where you literally can't remember your name or set limits for yourself or say no. -- Joan Tollifson

A therapist I called upon for help early in my own process responded to me with exaggerated boredom which seemed intended to convey his detachment from the dazzle of mystical experience. I was extremely psychically sensitive at the time and could feel a lot of aggressive, anxious energy beneath his feigned tranquillity. I hadn't simply caught him on a bad day, which might have accounted for his semi-depressed tone. Later I read an article he'd published stating that true Kundalini awakening was evidenced by a complete absence of ego (a feat which he had presumably achieved).

The more we are given, the more difficult it is to keep our balance and find a way to relate to heaven and earth without getting totally knocked out or swollen-headed. The religious traditions are not always too helpful with this. On the one hand, many teachings about Kundalini and spiritual discovery warn the initiate about the dangers of inflation, while on the other hand these texts and teachers wax ebullient over the superb level of attainment of one who has come so far in his journey. A strange double message emerges in which the initiate must behave in a self-deprecating manner while secretly convinced of his advanced spiritual status.

There are stages of Kundalini awakening that are quite simply spectacular and invoke genuine awe and reverence in the recipient. Advisors who warn against inflation frequently discourage people involved in spiritual emergence from feeling there is anything special happening to them, but it is this very sense of the extraordinary that breaks through our habitual ideation and sustains us through more turbulent stages of the process.

While for some, self-importance is a problem, for those who have long lived with an ingrained sense of personal insignificance, their newfound self-worth is immensely healing. Feeling valuable does not necessarily entail feeling superior to others, nor does it invariably tarnish one's spiritual beauty. It may simply be a healthy recognition of our unique and blessed place in the great scheme of things.

This is beautifully stated by one of Rachel Naomi Remen's patients, a CEO who made this healing discovery while recovering from prostate cancer: "I am shocked to have discovered this morning that I am the only me there is. I think this is the key to everything -- compassion, kindness, trust of life, mystery. A genuine and not inflated sense of importance and self-value. I've spent most of my life comparing myself to other men. Are they ahead of me in Forbes? Do they sit on more powerful boards? Are they smarter? Sexier? Do they have more hair? And all the time there is this other way of seeing things. I am not one of the motors my company produces by the hundreds of thousands. I am handmade. Less than perfect but more a work of creation than a product of technology. And I am not alone in this. Everyone is the only 'me' there

is."

At the other end of the scale, as more of us are networking and forming Kundalini support groups, it is a source of dismay to be confronted by Kundalini brethren with egos the size of the Great Pyramid. An awakened Kundalini, alas, is no antidote to egomania -- many otherwise highly evolved teachers have had this character failing.

Inflation often masks feelings of alienation and essential worthlessness. The impetus behind the inflation is a healthy one -- the need to matter, to have one's existence be meaningful. But this impulse goes astray when one has no real appreciation for oneself or others -- no path with heart. Then the desire to be valuable is used to create a larger-than-life identity to compensate for core feelings of nothingness.

For some people, a cycle of inflation and deflation has been a lifelong dilemma. In the extreme, this manifests as a manic-depressive syndrome. Pomposity and holier-than-thou posturing is a smoke screen which distracts from submerged feelings of sadness, vulnerability, rage and despair. The cure for this type of inflation is not admonitions to be more humble, but encouragement to explore and release the buried emotions.

Social denial of the psychic and spiritual realms paves the way for inflation of another type. The individual who has a spontaneous mystical experience then thinks, "No one in the history of the world has ever known what I have just encountered!" We need to respect the sacred nature of our experiences, but we go overboard when we deem them the apex of enlightenment, endowing us with the whole truth. Overestimating one's experiences in this way is isolating and alienates others. The remedy in this case is exposure to spiritual literature and contact with others who have had equally extraordinary experiences.

We may mistakenly think our spiritual experiences have elevated us to a transcendent station. From this "higher" level, we may believe we are expected to be fearless, exceedingly wise, unfaltering in faith, spiritually powerful, and pious in every thought and deed. It may seem that God or the Universe is testing us, demanding a new standard of purity and excellence from us, and failure to embody the requisite qualities will weigh heavily against our souls. In the latter case, we are not imagining ourselves superior to others so much as superior to who we really are. We may think we have shed our human traits, such as uncertainty, ignorance, conflict, and so forth, or we may believe we are being divinely called upon to instantly transcend all these things and must obey. Either way, we have lost sight of our actual situation. Being fearful, having doubts, reeling before the magnitude of profound awakening experiences -- these are all natural and authentic responses, which in no way constitute spiritual failure. Admitting to ourselves that we are still learning and still caught in our human limitations keeps us honest and grounded.

In my opinion, the more insidious danger is in concluding that transcendent experiences confer moral and religious authority over others. While many Kundalini veterans are in a position to offer guidance, a few spout their beliefs as if they were gospel. Some go so far as to create cults around themselves, encouraging none too subtle deference to their "higher wisdom." There is an adage that speaks to this: "Keep company with those who are seeking the truth, and run away from those who have found it."

Until the rest of the populace goes through an awakening, our heightened sensitivity, awareness, and mystic realizations are special, in the same way that being a born athlete or having a green thumb is special. I don't see how there can be anything spiritually correct in pretending this is not so. The mistake comes when feeling special turns into expecting homage from others.

At a deeper level, transcendent awareness does not incline us toward feelings of specialness so much as it endows us with knowledge of our holiness, and of the holiness of all existence. Attempts to convey this realization to those who have not consciously experienced it are usually futile. When I joyously exclaimed to a friend, "Everything is holy," he shot back, "That means nothing is holy."

I understood his point. He was hearing my words from the plane of intellect and logic, wherein perceptions are relative and dependent on oppositions: without an up, there can be no down, without an in, there can be no out, etc. This is a valid way of understanding the world, but there are equally valid means of apprehension, which do not take a linear and discursive route. There is no explaining this to someone who has never experienced a transcendent view of reality. Only when we have been granted a numinous vantage point do we see, if only briefly, that some things, like truth and love and Spirit, have no real opposites. They are complete in themselves, and their apparent absence in certain situations is actually a failure of perception. If we know how to look, and if we are blessed with greater vision, we find them everywhere.

In the course of my Kundalini process, the advisors who have helped me most have been those who have encouraged me to respect my own physical, emotional and psychic instincts. I'm learning to deeply listen and respond to the messages of my own body and psyche. The "treatments" which have benefited me most have been love, patience and faith. Gradually, I'm letting go of my -- and anyone else's -- ideas of what my reality should be. Floating in the endless mystery of being, I'm learning to trust in my own experience.

Chapter 12

PATHOLOGIZING THE SPIRIT

"The dictionary's first definition of mystical is 'direct communion with ultimate reality.' The second meaning: 'vague or incomprehensible.' Here is a central problem: Direct communion with ultimate reality is vague and incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it!"
-- Marilyn Ferguson

Due to the array of symptoms set off by Kundalini, the process is often misdiagnosed. Certain neurological and psychiatric illnesses may in fact be entirely or frequently cases of awakened Kundalini which medicine has been staring in the face for eons without recognizing what it was seeing.

For instance, Joan Borysenko mentions that people diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy (also known as complex partial seizures) "may report out-of-body experiences and also frequently report strange feelings akin to electrical discharges that originate at the base of the spine, give rise to orgasmic flows of energy, can cause their body to contort into yogalike postures, and sometimes lead to insightful revelations." Other so-called symptoms include a preoccupation with religious ideas.

What is authentic spiritual experience for the mystic might appear to be obsessive religious involvement to an uninformed observer. Repression of the Spirit runs so deep in the modern psyche that even when confronted with something that looks like a duck, walks like a duck and sounds like a duck, the clinician confidently proclaims: "We have before us a broken watch."

And anyone who says otherwise is a quack. (Sorry, couldn't resist the bad pun.)

Spiritual Persecution

"There is something called schizophrenia," said Jill Johnson, "and it means brokenhearted." Not long ago I came across a tragic story of a young woman whose unhappiness due to sad life experiences was medically mismanaged so badly it destroyed her life. She had married young to an abusive husband and had suffered a miscarriage with her first pregnancy. Her depression after the loss of her baby combined with the other stresses in her life prompted her to seek professional help. Unfortunately, the professional she contacted was a psychiatrist devoid of empathy or any understanding of human emotion. Instead of helping her deal with her grief and bad marriage, he labeled her schizophrenic and prescribed antipsychotic drugs. Being told her problems all stemmed from her mental defects -- her "schizophrenia" -- dashed her hopes of recovery and crumbled the remains of her self-esteem. This and the brain-damaging effects of long term antipsychotic and antidepressant drug use turned her life into a blur of medication-induced stupor and hospitalizations in psychiatric wards. After years of this dehumanizing regime, she became one of psychiatry's hidden Frankenstein monsters, developing full-blown psychosis.

For as long as psychiatry as a whole cannot distinguish between mental deterioration and natural emotional responses to life crises, the brokenhearted remain at risk of medical assault. This is doubly true for those of us experiencing the "holy madness" of spiritual awakening. B.S. Goel says that during his twenty year Kundalini process, he manifested symptoms of just about every mental illness on record. When Gopi Krishna was undergoing his own tormented awakening, he said he instinctively knew to steer clear of doctors and psychiatrists, no matter how bad his condition became. He realized they would not have a context to understand his mental and physical symptoms, and that in their ignorance, they might impose treatments which would have a deleterious effect on the process

While we were putting together Issue #22 of Shared Transformation (with the theme: "Insanity or Transformation?"), I came across the newly published *Caring for the Mind: The Comprehensive Guide to Mental Health*, which is a thick compendium of diagnostic criteria for major mental disorders recognized in the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders). Reading this book was educational to me in ways unintended by the authors, Dianne Hales and Robert E. Hales, M.D. This is the stuff taught in medical schools -- the DSM-IV is accepted as law by the majority of psychiatrists, mainstream therapists and insurance companies. These are the suppositions mainstream doctors measure our symptoms against. In the introduction, Dr. Allen J. Frances, Professor and Chairman of the Psychology Department of Duke University Medical Center, proudly states: "I recommend this timely, authoritative, and insightful book as a reference you can use with confidence for problems that affect you and those close to you, and as a source of information and enlightenment now and for years to come." News flash, doc, it's not so confidence-inspiring as you think. For anyone experiencing Kundalini, psychic opening or other forms of spiritual emergence, segments of this hefty tome read like the *Inquisitioner's Handbook*.

The most glaring omission in the book -- and indeed, in Western culture -- is a failure to consider spiritual elements as having any impact or influence whatsoever on the human psyche. In light of the considerable advances made in other disciplines, it is astounding that modern psychiatry is still bound by the very constrictions that Carl Jung found so objectionable in his early psychiatric training in 1900: It believes only in what is "probable, average, commonplace, barren of meaning" and by so doing, it manages "to renounce everything strange and significant, and reduce anything extraordinary to the banal." Some ninety years later, Seth Farber, Ph.D., one of the directors of The Network Against Coercive Psychiatry, echoed the same sentiment: "R.D. Laing was viewed by the Establishment as an extremist who 'romanticized' the suffering of the 'mentally ill.' The mental health experts have succeeded in de-romanticizing virtually every dimension of human existence, leaving us with a universe denuded of meaning, bereft of poetry, a lifeless machine."

Not incidentally, while only 10 percent of the general populace are atheists, a survey of American psychiatrists found that over half of them professed they did not believe in God. This goes a long way toward explaining psychiatry's long-standing antagonism toward spiritual and mystical experience! Those who enter spontaneous altered states of consciousness have traditionally been viewed as morally or mentally defective, and have been subjected to incarceration and repressive medical treatments.

The following are various "mental disorders" which include (without being officially recognized as such) Kundalini phenomenon. This is not to say that any of these categorizations exclusively concern Kundalini; rather, they reveal a confusion of symptoms whereby a doctor using these guidelines could easily mistake the Kundalini process for true mental illness. I am listing the disorders alphabetically.

Brief Psychotic Disorder is a sudden outbreak of disorganized speech and behavior, catatonia, and/or what is diagnosed as delusions and hallucinations. The episode lasts anywhere from a few hours to a month, and is usually triggered by "overwhelming stress." Spontaneous Kundalini trance states could be misdiagnosed as catatonia and most mystical experiences are dismissed as hallucination by psychiatry.

Conversion Disorder includes symptoms that have no apparent physical cause, such as psychosomatic "blindness, double vision, deafness, loss of sensation, inability to speak, impaired coordination or balance, weakness or paralysis, difficulty in swallowing, seizures, tremors, loss of consciousness, numbness of hands and feet." The authors explain that "conversion symptoms are not consciously or intentionally produced," and say that the syndrome can result from trauma. It is often found among shell-shocked soldiers during war. I know of cases that would fall into this category which are non-Kundalini related, such as a woman who became inexplicably paralyzed for a year after the shock of learning that her fiancée had secretly married another woman. The fact that the disorder frequently occurs to patients with clinically diagnosed neurological and orthopedic problems, including head injuries, seems in direct contradiction to the standing psychiatric theory that the symptoms are unconsciously produced to hide shameful emotions or to avoid self-responsibility!

Delirium: This condition is not the same as dementia, which is found in Alzheimer's disease. Delirium, in which the patient is quite "out of it," is often preceded by "restlessness, difficulty in thinking clearly, hypersensitivity to sights and sounds, insomnia, daytime sleepiness, and vivid dreams and nightmares." We are told that "severe delirium" can lead to such hallucinations as sensations of "insects crawling under the skin," which the authors claim is really just "itching." (What clinical instrument, pray tell, detects these real sensations?)

Tremors, shaking, rapid heartbeat and flushed face are common in delirious patients, as is difficulty concentrating and memory lapses. Many physical illnesses cause delirium, as do head injuries, drug overdoses or abrupt drug withdrawal. Antipsychotic drugs have been known to cause it, yet antipsychotic drugs are often administered to control it! (I very much doubt that doctors prescribing Thorazine to counter delirium are deliberately employing the homeopathic theorem that like cures likes.)

Delusional Disorder: This category includes stalkers who believe against all evidence to the contrary that the object of their affections returns their love; persecution complexes which often lead to violent "retaliation" over imagined slights; inordinately controlling, possessive spouses who are certain -- again, without cause -- that their partner is unfaithful; and you or I, if we are convinced of the reality of chakras, spirits or Kundalini and our doctor is convinced otherwise.

Depersonalization Disorder "involves a persistent, strong, disquieting, and unpleasant sense of unreality about one's self" which people find very difficult to describe. Out-of-body and near-death experiences, as well as many levels of transcendent consciousness would fall into this category. DD is considered a mental illness despite the fact that, as the authors state, 70% of young adults have reported an episode of this nature. (This may mean the younger generation is expanding in consciousness very rapidly!) While this condition can be a reaction to extreme crisis, loss or trauma, it is not an uncommon response to transcendent experience, and in such cases, surely should be treated through spiritual (not psychological) counseling.

Depressive Disorders: These speak for themselves. The greatest danger from psychiatric intervention is the use of electroconvulsive therapy, still considered the treatment of choice for drug-resistant depression.

Panic Disorders are discussed later in this chapter.

Schizoaffective Disorder: "The combination of a psychotic disorder and a depressive disorder..." In essence, this is schizophrenic tendencies combined with a potential for suicide.

Schizoid Personality Disorder: I am including this purported disorder, not because it has direct relevance to the Kundalini process, but to show how at odds psychiatry is with religion. An individual may be diagnosed with SPD if he or she is a loner, very emotionally restrained, disinterested in socializing or intimacy, involved in few activities and indifferent to the opinions of others. This may be a description of the Unibomber suspect, Ted Kaczynski, but these very qualities are also cherished in monastic religious groups. What is being described is none other than the detachment of a natural ascetic. Yogis, hermit-mystic types, nuns and monks of all traditions as well as many shamans display these traits -- and work hard to attain them!

Schizophrenia: While schizophrenia is believed to develop between the ages of 17-24, another term -- Schizophreniform Disorder -- is attached to symptoms arising later in life and sounds more like a description of temporary Kundalini psychosis than does the profile for general schizophrenia.

As usual, anything, which would strike the average citizen as preposterous, from the outright bonkers to signs of psychospiritual development, are classified as schizophrenic delusions. I.e., weird paranoid ideas (believing you are victim of a conspiracy between the CIA and Roger Rabbit, or that the TV weather forecaster is deliberately sending you coded messages about very personal matters); absurd positive or negative inflation (being convinced you are Napoleon, the Devil or the Tooth Fairy); weird behavior or utter disregard for personal appearance and hygiene without awareness of the affect this has on others... and hypersensitivity; hearing inner sounds, music, voices; tingling or burning sensations. Another schizophrenic delusion, we are told, is the belief that "they have a rare gift, such as extrasensory perception." (The authors do not make clear whether the schizophrenic is delusional because he or she is not, in fact, experiencing ESP, or because ESP is impossible and therefore anyone who thinks they have this ability is bananas.)

E. Fuller Torrey offers the following symptoms as typical indications of schizophrenia:

- 1) Alterations of the senses
- 2) Inability to sort and interpret incoming sensations, and an inability therefore to respond appropriately
- 3) Delusions and hallucinations
- 4) Altered sense of self
- 5) Changes in emotions
- 6) Changes in movements
- 7) Changes in behavior

Obviously, something is wrong here; many if not all of the most common Kundalini manifestations would qualify as signs of schizophrenia according to Torrey's list! Here is one of the cases he uses to exemplify delusions and hallucinations "At an early stage the appearance of colored flashes of light was common. These took the form either of distant streaks or of nearby round glowing patches about a foot in diameter." If perceiving such flashes of light are "delusional," most of the world's mystics, seers and illumined spiritual leaders were simply hallucinating and religious experience can be written off as brain dysfunction. In the hands of modern psychiatry, Buddha would have been diagnosed with schizoid personality disorder and plied with antidepressants! In fact, every Avatar, saint and holy person from time immemorial meets the current diagnostic criteria for multiple mental disorders. This would be hilarious if psychiatrists did not wield such obscene power over people's lives. In many states, psychiatrists are legally entitled to commit anyone -- regardless of whether or not the person is their patient -- to a psychiatric ward and force them to undergo drug or electroshock treatments against their will and without the consent of their families for however long they deem necessary (or for however long one's insurance or Medicare will pay for it). Somatization Disorder is psychobabble for "we can find no biological explanation for your illness so you must be nuts." Many physical Kundalini symptoms would easily fall into this category, which tellingly includes menstrual difficulties beginning early in life for women. For years, male doctors pooh-pooed menstrual problems as "all in the head." With today's increasing numbers of female physicians, women are no longer being told they are imagining PMS or menstrual cramps, but psychiatry is still male-dominated.

Undifferentiated Somatoform Disorder: Do researchers hand out prizes for whoever comes up with the most unintelligible label for a disease? Don't be surprised if this one winds up on your medical chart. Symptoms include difficulty in swallowing, fatigue, loss of appetite, digestive complaints and so forth, which have no apparent physical cause. USD symptoms often begin or get worse during periods of stress or crisis in the patient's life. These symptoms are also believed to be caused by repressed emotion.

I am not arguing that emotional repression cannot cause difficulties of this sort; I am sure that it can. Were psychiatry more hospitable to the soul, there might be a chance for earnest dialogue

between the medical and spiritual communities. Many psychiatric insights could be applicable to mitigate the severity of certain Kundalini symptoms. But as it stands, confiding in a shrink can be hazardous to your health, particularly if you are experiencing awakened Kundalini.

Medical Mismanagement

In our recent past (and I very much hope it is entirely in the past), even such a natural process as childbirth has been treated savagely. I have heard atrocity stories of delivery room nurses forcibly holding shut the legs of a pregnant woman in advanced labor because the obstetrician was not yet on the scene to authorize the birth. Such practices have resulted in brain damaged or stillborn infants. Just so, a grossly medically mismanaged and violated Kundalini awakening can result in an arrested or aborted process. "Psychotic-like states -- spiritual emergencies -- can fragment self-boundaries, permanently damaging the self if mishandled," warns John Nelson: "Such relatively benign states are well known to experienced spiritual guides... But because these crises superficially resemble pathological states, less experienced guides often confuse the two. This is a cardinal error. Many treatments that are appropriate for malignantly regressive [altered states of consciousness] are contraindicated for spiritual emergencies, and vice versa."

We have seen how psychiatry mistakenly lumps together those suffering from life's many blows with those who are overwhelmed by spiritual awakening. A mistake in the opposite direction may be occurring among those who claim that all cases of mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and manic-depression are in fact Kundalini disturbances. In his book, *Science and the Evolution of the Consciousness*, Hiroshi Motoyama, (who has personally experienced Kundalini) describes his scientific findings using an apparatus by which some of the bio-electric changes associated with risen Kundalini can be measured. As part of his research, Motoyama, a physician, acupuncturist and electrical engineer, compared test results from examination of patients clinically diagnosed as psychotic (group C) with two other groups. Group A was composed of highly spiritually developed individuals who had experienced major alterations in consciousness, and group B were people who had begun to spiritually awaken and were noticing physical and psychological changes, but had not had transcendent experiences. The results of the study strongly suggest that Kundalini-triggered psychosis is of a different order -- organically and energetically -- than other mental illnesses.

"In general," Motoyama summarized, "I found that group A subjects can easily be distinguished from individuals diagnosed as mentally unbalanced, whereas many group B subjects initially show distinct similarities to the deranged." On further testing, the differences between the B and C group widened. A corroborating series of studies examining galvanic skin resistance data consistently indicated global imbalances of the autonomic nervous system of the psychotic patients. No such systemic problems were detected in groups A or B. Further tests measuring the overall metabolic state of the organism showed high readings for those with awakened Chakras, and extremely low readings for the psychologically unbalanced subjects.

Jung discovered that archetypal themes repeatedly appear in the dreams of both ordinary and insane people, which would suggest that at our core, we have universal access to the same territories. But this does not mean we are all traveling at the same speed or in the same direction. Anyone who has studied case histories of seriously deranged patients (or has had much personal

contact with such people) knows that while there may be a strange internal logic to their madness, there is also a chaotic and insular quality to it. This is not true of mystical "psychosis." Observers of people in spiritual crisis report that they remain cognizant that their experiences are extraordinary, while psychotics have no such sense that they are behaving and talking bizarrely.

Psychosynthesis founder Roberto Assagioli mentioned "cases of irregular development" in which certain individuals "reach a high level with one part of their personality and yet [may] be handicapped by certain infantile fixations or dominated by unconscious conflicts." Gopi Krishna also spoke of this phenomenon, which is more recognized in Eastern cultures. Those "who combine extraordinary clairvoyant gifts... with schizophrenia or manic-depressive psychosis in varying degrees" are called Avahoots in India and Mastanas in Persia. I have witnessed several cases of this type. I believe they are in a parallel predicament to my difficulties with my spine injury. Kundalini complicates and aggravates my condition, but it certainly could not therefore be said that because some of us have both a risen Kundalini and back pain, everyone whose back hurts has an activated Kundalini.

Much mental/emotional illness is a defense against consciousness. Jung had a case of a psychotic woman who, he learned through her dreams and symbolic language, had allowed and encouraged her own children to drink contaminated water in a subconscious desire to rid herself of them and be reunited with a lost lover. When one child -- her little daughter -- actually died, the woman went crazy. Jung saw clearly that she could not recover until she had squarely faced what she had done and taken responsibility for it. This proved true. Once he confronted her with her culpability, she totally regained her sanity and had no relapses thereafter.

By contrast, in spiritual awakening, what is being called psychosis is not a defense against knowing the truth, but an awareness of truths the populace is defended against! We break cultural taboos when we see more of reality than other people can see. In this case, we do not need help to face up to our own truth, although we may need help dealing with the terrible loneliness that comes of knowing too much. If our previous beliefs about reality were too rigid, the new material can throw us into shock, temporarily producing mental/emotional disturbances. This may be why there were superficial similarities between psychotics and neophyte spiritual initiates in Motoyama's studies.

If we are unfamiliar with spiritual phenomena, even something as benign as sensory awareness of our own Chakras can make us feel crazy, but this is only our fear and bewilderment in the face of the unknown. In this regard, Motoyama assures us, "Anyone, no matter how healthy, who is successful in the practice of a spiritual discipline, will most likely undergo a period of psychological and/or physical instability as a matter of course, since the body and mind must change and adjust to their new relationship to the nonsensory dimensions of existence. This is a natural function, and no cause for alarm."

Social misconceptions make it difficult for many people to distinguish between actual mystical experience (or healthy mystical experience) and mental degeneration. In her otherwise excellent book on mysticism, *The Ecstatic Journey*, Sophy Burnham falls off track in attempting to distinguish between mystical experience and schizophrenia (and other forms of mental illness). "I heard of one woman who in the midst of a manic episode decided that she was having a

spiritual experience, as she wandered homeless through the streets, subject to energy waves," says Burnham. "In these distorted states, the spiritual imagery may include satanic encounters, strange dreams, or the idea that everything is fraught with meaning... Everything becomes a message from God."

Burnham makes several erroneous conclusions in this passage. The woman roaming the streets may have lost touch with reality or she may have simply been indiscreet about declaring her experiences to people who could not conceive of internal energy waves as being something real. (Nowhere in her book does Burnham associate energy currents with genuine spiritual awakening.) It is difficult to tell from this if the woman displayed actual signs of mental disorientation or if Burnham wrongly assumed that sensations of energy were proof of delirium. "Satanic encounters and strange dreams" are hardly indicative of 'distorted states;' many of us have had bizarre dreams and confrontations with demonic or negative entities at some point in our awakening. Much as we may wish otherwise, dark and unfriendly forces do exist on many planes, and becoming aware of them does not demonstrate mental dysfunction.

Burnham is making the common mistake of confusing content with response. The problem for the schizophrenic is not a deluded idea that everything has meaning and is a message from the Divine; shamans and mystics throughout the ages have known that everything is indeed meaningful and have used this knowledge to good purpose. This is where the difference lies. The schizophrenic or manic person lacks the ability to wisely utilize psychic and spiritual information. Seeing that the candle's light signifies Divine Light, the mentally unbalanced person eats the candle or burns himself with the flame in a misguided attempt to merge with God. He cannot distinguish between symbol and essence and therefore behaves inappropriately. He is overwhelmed by the complexity of his perception, while the mystic is able to maintain the same vastness of awareness without losing her powers of discernment.

It is not what we see or feel or know, but how we relate to this information that spells the difference between madness and sanity. As Don Juan once told Castaneda, the trick is in not "losing our marbles" when confronted with the awesome and mysterious.

Burnham tells of another man who claimed to be God rather than to have merged with God. She holds out this subtle distinction as a sign of insanity (not to mention blasphemy), yet later in the book she quotes esteemed mystics as having said essentially the same thing. In fact, God-realization is regarded as the pinnacle of enlightenment in Eastern religions.

I had this experience when I was twenty-one years old and it is not one of merging but of directly knowing. Unlike the man Burnham speaks of, I did not thereafter become a megalomaniac. (Egomania is the chief danger of God-Self awakening -- many gurus have succumbed to it.) I knew that El Collie was not God, but that I AM GOD -- I am the One-Self dreaming the whole of creation, as we all really are. Rather than proclaiming myself enlightened, I simply shut up about it and continued on as always. Prior to this, I have only mentioned it to three other people, two of whom also had this experience. I suppose that while I'm out of the closet I may as well add that contrary to myth, God-realization is not the final step on the path because there is no final step. The journey is in truth an eternal dance: Shiva!

As Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat remarked, "We're all mad here." But different kinds of craziness ask for different kinds of healing. Some, like the God-intoxication of the true mystic, may not need help at all. Just letting be is sometimes the best medicine.

No matter how serious the physical, mental and emotional problems of the process may appear, Roberto Assagioli would remind us that these "are merely temporary reactions, by-products, so to speak, of an organic process of inner growth and regeneration." A temporary episode of apparent psychosis, when allowed to run its course in a supportive environment most often leads to new levels of inner clarity and awareness. Conversely, bombarding the system with mood-altering chemicals may prevent the erupting unconscious material from being integrated, resulting in a "frozen" condition in which the patient neither returns to normal nor is able to complete the interrupted self-healing process.

More brutal than the arsenal of drugs are involuntary incarceration in mental hospitals, electroshock treatments (which permanently damage brain tissue), and various inhumane restraints. In Denmark, where electroconvulsive treatments are common, many "Kundalini victims" have been subjected to this very dangerous "cure." Here in the US, Kundalini patients have not fared much better. Patients in benign altered states of consciousness, manifesting vigorous kriyas, have been strapped for days or weeks to hospital beds. Even the softer therapies can be hurtful to someone in the midst of a transformational process. Professionals with a know-it-all attitude, but lack understanding of spiritual emergence, can be patronizing at best. At worst, they can and do destroy lives.

Thomas Szasz, one of modern psychiatry's most blistering critics, has warned that "Americans today are more misinformed and more gullible about the true nature of psychiatry than people anywhere have ever been." From its inception, he asserts that psychiatry has been a legal way for people with power to get rid of less socially influential family members, neighbors or other human beings who were causing them any kind of distress. "Because psychiatrists have a great deal of power," says Szasz, "and because they are utterly corrupted by the pretense of helping so-called patients while in fact acting as agents of social control on behalf the patients' familial and social antagonists, it is imperative that potential customers of psychiatric services be familiar not with what mental health professionals say, but with what they do." As Szasz sees it, psychiatry's most dangerous feature is its "deliberate, systematic dehumanization of man, in the name of mental health."

No matter how disturbed the person, John Perry has found that offering support is better than drug-induced repression: "... in the high-arousal state when the archetypal unconscious is energized and activated, the psyche autonomously does its own work in its own fashion. What it needs for this is not 'treatment' but rather a coming into close and deep relationship with another individual who empathizes and encourages but does not interfere."

Perry's view corresponds with that of spiritual traditions like Siddha yoga, in which the risen Kundalini is regarded as the intelligence of the Goddess, an inner divine feminine guru who knows exactly what She is doing. "When Kundalini awakening takes place through grace, it will rise of its own accord, and become established where it should be established," Swami

Muktananda assured his followers. "Kundalini will take care of Herself, for the Shakti is a conscious and all-knowing power."

Unfortunately, few therapists and psychiatrists have been trained to deal with extraordinary, non-pathological states of consciousness. Some try to force the client's experiences to fit into a reductionistic formula of childhood trauma or unresolved personality issues. Sometimes they are "successful" at this. With such therapeutic "aid," a woman undergoing profound psychic opening became convinced that all her spiritual experiences were meaningless hallucinations resulting from childhood abuse.

An Abridged History of Western Spiritual Blindness

It's disheartening to live in an era, which provides so little support for transformational experiences. Until very recently, the phenomenon of Kundalini awakenings was virtually unheard of in the West -- which is not to say the process never happened. I am very suspicious of the 19th century and earlier use of the now obsolete "hysterical" diagnosis. These patients had unexplained seizures and related neurological symptoms which makes one wonder how many might have been experiencing unrecognized Kundalini awakening. Hysteria was known in the days of Hippocrates, although it was considered a pathological condition specific to women. The so-called hysteric of ancient Greece displayed such physical symptoms as: "paralysis or tremor of the limbs, functional blindness and deafness, shortness of breath, pain in the chest, lumps in the throat, pain in the groin or legs, fainting fits, skin rashes, digestive disturbances... and menstrual blood which flowed the wrong way and flooded the other organs of the body, including the brain."

This last anatomically impossible symptom caused the hysterical diagnosis to fall out of favor with later European physicians. Even today, the "reversal of the menstrual flow" idea is regarded by scholars as a quaint and primitive notion. What an idiot that Hippocrates was, imagining blood in the uterus could flow backward through the body all the way to the brain! Try substituting the words "Kundalini energies" (which often feel like warm liquid moving through the body) for "blood," keeping in mind the Eastern religious teachings that claim the risen Kundalini reverses the flow of Shakti from the sexual organs. Sexism aside, Hippocrates may get the last laugh.

Scientists in the 18th century likewise guffawed at Mesmer's theory that the universe "floated in an interconnecting fluid resembling ether, and one physical body influenced another through vibrations passing along the currents of this invisible medium." Mesmer effected numerous miraculous cures by serving as a bodily channel for the mysterious "ether" -- which the Chinese knew as "chi," the Hindus called "prana," and which today's healers simply call "energy." In later centuries, Mesmer's followers developed his methods into what is in modern times known as hypnosis, believing they had salvaged the viable part of his theories while dissociating themselves from his insane "interconnecting fluid" concepts. (Mesmer, like Wilhelm Reich with his orgone theory and others too far ahead of their time, died a social pariah and broken man.)

Dawn of a New Era

It may be that the incidence of Kundalini isn't actually increasing, but the recognition of it has

increased. Who knows how many bona fide cases in the past were written off as mental aberrations? Like seeds germinating in vain beneath the pavement, many potential healers and teachers have been lost to the rigidity of a culture that would not admit them into the world. Thank Goddess, the pavement is finally beginning to crack and the seeds are thrusting their way into the light.

While current accounts of Kundalini awakenings remain subjective and anecdotal (anathema to the scientific community), in the not too distant future, Kundalini may yet be validated by science. Research in this direction is already underway. When the two Australian researchers Bronwyn Fox & Jasmin Arthur-Jones finished their presentation at the Kundalini Research Network Symposium 1994, members of the audience exclaimed that their data was "stunning." What they have uncovered is that since 1980, when the criteria for what Fox calls "the myth of panic disorders" was added to the DSM, individuals experiencing classic Kundalini symptoms have been told, in effect, that they are mentally/emotionally ill and have been medically [mis] treated accordingly. Their research has received high recognition: in 1995, the combined governments of Australia and New Zealand presented Fox and Arthur-Jones with the prestigious Silver Award to honor their achievements in the field of mental health via their panic disorder work.

From Fox's and Arthur-Jones' findings from their two scientific studies, it would appear that a third to three-quarters of all people diagnosed with "panic attacks" are, in fact, undergoing Kundalini awakenings! Apparently, as more people experiencing involuntary and unrecognized Kundalini awakening in the 70's flocked to doctors and psychiatrists for help, the medical authorities decided that these patients were having "uncued panic attacks" (i.e., they were having episodes of extreme fear with no provocation). All the Kundalini symptoms were explained away as effects of excessive adrenaline in the system brought on by the allegedly unprovoked terror these patients often reported.

In truth, Arthur-Jones explains, the fear they experience is a perfectly normal response to unknown (to them) and overwhelming Kundalini experiences, including: feeling rushes of electric, hot prickly or vibrating energy throughout their bodies; spontaneous out-of-body experiences (which psychology calls "dissociation"); experiencing inner sounds and brilliant inner lights. Additional symptoms and sensations most commonly reported by these individuals (which they say are "constantly changing" and which many of them experience 24 hours a day) are: depression, shaking, trembling, headaches, lower back pains, temporary paralysis, neck aches, diarrhea, extreme exhaustion and fear, abdominal pain, hot flashes, sciatica, night sweats, migrating unexplainable body pain, recurrent pelvic pain, unexplainable rashes, chronic and temporary pains all over the body, sensitivity to light, acute hearing, difficulty breathing, burning sensations in the stomach. Sound familiar?

The majority of these people have never meditated, and seriously fear they are dying, going insane or losing control when these experiences and symptoms occur. 74% of these so-called "panic disorder" patients said that their nervous system was functioning differently than it had before their first "panic attack." 33% reported kriyas, which they called "spontaneous physical jerking" which occurred most vigorously at night in bed. A third or more reported the following mystical experiences during or after their "panic attacks":

- * Seeing a white or golden light
- * An overwhelming sense of love
- * New understanding of spiritual truths
- * An emotional flood of devotion, joy or reverence
- * Expansion of consciousness
- * Intense feelings of peace
- * Overwhelming sense of wonder and awe

In working with these individuals (none of whom seemed to have been helped much by the standard medicating approach), what Fox and Arthur-Jones found most beneficial was teaching them meditation as a way of releasing their fear of the process, and encouraging them to allow the symptoms and sensations to occur. (Before, due to fear or belief that they were crazy, they had tried to resist and fight off these manifestations of the process.) Although what is being called the "panic attacks" -- i.e., the Kundalini experiences -- do not stop, "recovery" is defined as the lack of fear of these manifestations. The most helpful therapeutic technique was helping these patients work through inner issues brought up by the process itself -- i.e., healing past trauma and making personal adjustments for their own growth and well-being. Fox has pointed out that the newest DSM-IV has made some progress in recognizing that these so-called "uncued attacks" are a different syndrome than phobias, post traumatic stress, and anxiety attacks, which rarely involve Kundalini symptoms. However, the manual still fails to recognize that this is indeed the Kundalini process (even though it now includes a separate categorization for spiritual emergence experiences). In a similar vein, medical researchers studying symptoms such as "a racing heart, muscle tension, head pain and perspiration" that are sometimes triggered by meditation have dubbed this process "relaxation-induced panic." Neither the researchers nor Dr. Barry Burnett, who wrote an article reporting this research, realize that these are possible signs of Kundalini activation and not simply a product of fear! But at least they acknowledge that meditation is not a guarantee of spiritual smooth sailing. Burnett quotes Nathaniel Mead (who mentioned the research in the March/April '94 Utne Reader): "When a meditator is led to expect stress reduction and instead comes face to face with his true self, the result can be anything but relaxing."

It's sad that in the name of healing, so much harm can be done. After we printed the information about the Fox and Arthur-Jones research in Shared Transformation newsletter, we were inundated with letters of gratitude from our readers. In one poignant letter, a reader who had been struggling in the dark with her Kundalini symptoms for twelve years said that her heart sang upon discovering agoraphobia and panic attacks among the common Kundalini difficulties. It was only when she came across this information, she told us, that she was finally able to "forgive herself" for these symptoms, which she had previously perceived as signs of personal inadequacy and spiritual failure.

Panic attacks can occur when Kundalini is trying to bring up repressed emotion, traumatic memories or other unconscious material. The writer and physician Rachel Naomi Remen began having panic attacks soon after exposure to transformational ideas at Esalen. A therapist asked her to close her eyes and allow image to come to mind that related to the panic. Remen saw a thin, flat white rectangle, which at first she thought was a business card. The therapist told her to contemplate the image for the next few weeks and just allow it to reveal its meaning.

Eventually, this happened. "Suddenly, the flat white rectangle reappeared in my mind's eye," said Remen, "but this time it started to change shape, to puff up." This so alarmed her that it set off another panic attack. But the message finally came through: "The white rectangle was not a business card after all. It was a marshmallow that had been subjected to a steady external pressure for many, many years. The pressure had distorted its natural shape so that it was long and flat. But now, this pressure had been released. Its shape was changing and it was terrified. It felt as if it were dying. But the marshmallow was not dying, it was returning to itself. The shape that had been most familiar to it was not its own shape. With the lifting of the pressure, something deep in it could remember its integrity, its true shape, and was reclaiming it now."

Remen realized that her childhood conditioning and years of medical training had stomped down her natural sensitivity and tenderness. Now she was regaining these precious parts of herself: "Although I could be analytical and pragmatic, by nature I was an intuitive, even a mystic... I had remembered and I was going home." She never had another panic attack.

The word "panic" originally meant terror of the nature god Pan, who had been demonized by the patriarchal church. In fact, Pan is Greek for "all;" the great Pan was believed to be omnipresent in the natural world, much like the goddess Kundalini is said to be the life-force. In this sense, the word "panic" was first used to denigrate the direct, inner connection to primal, sacred forces. History repeats itself, alas.

It is commonly believed that people who have psychic and spiritual experiences are other-worldly and eccentric at best; the less charitable sentiment is that they are crackpots, far more psychologically unsound than those who do not venture into such strange waters. But when sociologist Andrew Greeley of the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center tested such individuals, including those who claimed to have had profound mystical experiences, he discovered just the opposite was true. These people had top scores in the standard tests that measure psychological health. Greeley reported that far from being "religious nuts or psychiatric cases," most of these individuals demonstrated higher than normal intelligence and somewhat less religious involvement than average. In fact, Larry Dossey notes that according to Norman Bradburn, one of the psychologists who developed these tests, "no other factor had ever been found to correlate so highly with psychological balance as did mystical experience." Their findings were reiterated in other researcher's studies of indigenous shamans. Far from being psychotic or hysteric (as psychologists had originally supposed), shamans exemplified a higher level of mental health and balance than other members of their society.

Hopefully, those of us having these powerful, and little understood spiritual experiences, are the vanguard of a new epoch in human awareness. The persecution we suffer is probably much less than what someone in the throes of spiritual emergence must have faced 20, 30 or more years

ago. Even if we are unable to get through to those people who are locked in abysmal ignorance, we can stand up for ourselves internally, and not give others the power to interpret our reality for us. Through our networking and our unimpeded completion of our own processes, let us be instrumental in spreading awareness of the true nature of transformation. Let's pray that our children and their children will inherit a better, wiser world in which spiritual evolution is recognized and honored as an authentic, purposeful, and crucial part of human development.

Dangerous Medications

The old medical standby "Take two aspirin and call me in the morning" has its modern counterpart in "Take Prozac and see me in three months." Most people who consult doctors for help with mental, emotional or physical Kundalini illness are eventually prescribed psychotherapeutic drugs. In *The Stormy Search for the Self*, Christina and Stanislav Grof note that those who are experiencing spiritual emergency "often feel helpless and welcome assistance from any source," making them especially vulnerable to inappropriate treatment. As the Grofs point out, repressive medications "often add to the person's confusion and disorientation." More ominously, a multitude of the possible adverse reactions to these medications are very similar to Kundalini symptoms. While the naturally occurring Kundalini manifestations are usually harmless and transient, their evil twin symptoms of chemical poisoning can result in permanent (and sometimes fatal) physical damage.

In my own case, two different physicians (a general practitioner and a neurologist) offered me antidepressants for my physical symptoms. The first prescribed trazadone (generic Desyrel) for my breathing and swallowing difficulties. (These symptoms later vanished by themselves; I learned they were typical manifestations of heart and throat chakra openings.) I was given a very low dosage to be taken before bed, since the doctor told me the only side effect I might encounter would be slight drowsiness. She assured me that this was a very safe medication and that in her many years of practice, only one man had complained to her of an adverse reaction to this drug.

The night I took my first trazadone tablet, I was jolted awake an hour later with my whole respiratory system in revolt. All the mucus membranes of my nose, mouth, throat and sinuses had swollen so much I was nearly suffocating, and blood was pouring from my nose! It took hours for these effects to subside. The next morning when I reported this incident to my doctor, she advised me to discontinue the medication. (Even had she instructed me to continue it, I would never have gone near the stuff again.)

The second antidepressant prescribed for me two years later was desipramine. This was when I sought help for my excruciating back pain. My neurologist told me this drug had been found useful for alleviating chronic pain and said the only side effect I might encounter would be "dryness of the mouth." When I asked him if the medication was addictive, he answered "Not at all."

This time I didn't take his word for it. I checked in four reference books that list uses and warnings for prescription drugs. Not one mentioned any pain-relieving properties, but all four said that desipramine should never be abruptly discontinued, as this could produce severe

withdrawal symptoms. To me, this is a working definition of an addictive drug! Each book gave a somber enumeration of "minor" to "major" side effects, many of which were substantially more serious than a dry mouth. Most of the tricyclates carry the same risks. Brand names for these antidepressants include Norpramin, Pertofrane, Tofranil, Janimine, Elavil, Endep, Aventyl, Pamelor and Vivactil. The possible side effects are as follows: Agitation, anxiety, blurred vision, chest pains, confusion, constipation, convulsions, cramps, diarrhea, difficulty in urinating, dizziness, drowsiness, dry mouth, enlarged or painful breasts (in both sexes), fainting, fatigue, fever, fluid retention, hair loss, hallucinations, headaches, impotence, heartburn, increased skin sensitivity to sunlight, insomnia, loss of appetite, mood changes, mouth sores, nausea, nervousness, nightmares, nosebleeds, numbness in the fingers or toes, palpitations, peculiar tastes in the mouth, restlessness, ringing in the ears, seizures, skin rash, sleep disorders, sore throat, sweating, tremors, uncoordinated movements or balance problems, unusual bleeding or bruising, vomiting, weakness, weight gain or loss, or yellowing of the skin or eyes.

So many of these symptoms are commonly reported Kundalini manifestations, and which might be overlooked as serious warning signs by someone going through a Kundalini awakening.

The tricyclate antidepressants are known to be antagonistic to spiritual emergence. They may arrest the process in an unfinished stage of emotional clearing, prolonging or prohibiting psychological resolution. According to Peter Breggin, research indicates that these potentially devastating drugs are "hardly much better than placebo." When they do work, they produce "lethargy and disinterest, that feeling of being 'zonked.'" They also tend to produce generalized mental dysfunction and... render the mind unable to generate higher psychospiritual responses." And they have been known to trigger or aggravate psychosis in those whose psychic balance is fragile, (which happens in many phases of spiritual awakening).

Armed with all of this information, there was no way I was going to dose myself with this chemical invitation to iatrogenic disease. Besides all the obvious reasons for avoiding them, these medications rarely take effect until they have been circulating in the system for 3-4 weeks. I don't want to put any foreign substance into my body that I have no real need for (I was not suffering depression in either case), and that I can't safely stop taking when or if I suffer a bad reaction to it.

As frequently prescribed for those experiencing the mental overwhelm of altered states are the antipsychotics. This class of neuroleptic drugs includes Thorazine, Stelazine, Prolixin, Vesprin, Haldol, Navane, Trilafon, Tindal, Taractan, Serentil, Orap, Quide, Repoise, Compazine, Dartal, Clozaril and Mellaril. Some of the most life-threatening potential drug reactions to these are nearly identical to Kundalini symptoms: Spasms of the neck (if severe, can lead to death by asphyxiation), difficulty swallowing, protrusion of the tongue, mask-like faces, drooling, tremors, pill-rolling motions, motor restlessness (an inability to remain physically still), agitation, insomnia, shuffling gait (I experienced something akin to this for several weeks at the beginning of my Kundalini awakening).

A very disturbing neuroleptic-induced disorder is TD (tardive dyskinesia). (The tricyclate antidepressants have also been suspected of triggering this disease.) This condition is permanent and incurable, and can appear years after the drug is discontinued! The TD symptoms, which can

mimic kriyas, often begin with slight undulations of the tongue. This later develops into rhythmic, involuntary movements of the face, mouth or jaw, such as puffing of the cheeks, puckering of the mouth, chewing movements, sticking out the tongue, and so on. Sometimes these automatic movements also involve the hands and feet. The drug manufacturers advise physicians to terminate use of medication if any of these symptoms appear. But it might not dawn on those who were experiencing kriyas before taking these meds that the drug and not the Kundalini is creating these symptoms.

Peter Breggin describes an unusually severe case of TD in a woman who was "grossly disfigured and disabled" and could "no longer control her body." He tells of her "extreme writhing movements and spasms involving the face, head, neck, shoulders, limbs, extremities, torso and back -- nearly the entire body." From this description, one might conceivably identify her as someone in the most intense phase of Kundalini kriyas. But Breggin goes on to say that the woman "had difficulty standing, sitting, or lying down, and the difficulties worsen as she attempts to carry out voluntary actions." We might gather from this that although the symptoms bear a superficial similarity, the kriyas are signs of neurological stimulation, but TD is an indication of neurological destruction.

In my experience, and in everything I have studied about Kundalini, the automatic movements of the kriyas become most pronounced when one is relaxed. They subside or vanish altogether when there is a need to perform "voluntary actions." (It is also sometimes possible to negotiate with the energy and ask it to tone down under special circumstances.) Other serious reactions to the neuroleptic drugs include allergic reactions, blood abnormalities, cardiac arrest, catatonia, cerebral edema, endocrine disturbances, grand mal and petit mal convulsions, hypotension (abnormally low blood pressure), intestinal paralysis, liver damage, psychosis, skin disorders, urinary retention, and something called Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome (NMS), which has a fatality rate of 12-20%. Symptoms of NMS include muscle rigidity, irregular pulse or blood pressure and altered mental states, all of which likewise can be encountered during a Kundalini process. If all this isn't bad enough, these medications can also produce strokes, heart poisoning, bone-marrow poisoning, and suicide due to drug-induced despair.

Breggin unequivocally states that the neuroleptics all cause brain damage and "are among the most dangerous medications ever used in medicine." He doubts they would be legal if they were given to anyone but individuals judged mentally ill. "We tend to hold the health and well-being of psychiatric patients in low regard, a prejudice that has resulted in drastic harm to millions of people."

Aside from the risk of adverse reactions and side effects, approaching the Kundalini process with medication sends a message of illness, obscuring the fact that the afflicted individual is undergoing a transmutive spiritual journey. It's unfortunate, as psychiatrist John Perry says, that "At the very time when one needs loving acceptance one finds oneself either alone or surrounded by professionals who want to suppress the process and make one conform to the ways of the former self and former world."

To the extent that we attach shame and blame to mental and emotional disturbances, we can easily be duped by medical propaganda which reassures us that although something is indeed out

of whack, it is a biochemical mistake of nature and not our faults. If we did not feel guilty about our suffering, this ruse would not work. I am saddened when people who are trying to be unflinchingly honest and responsible impute their pain to their resistance to life or their failure to abide by some standard of perfection. Mental and emotional turmoil don't prove that we are unstable or that life is hopeless.

The Healing Side of Depression

"The culture expects one to be manic: hyperactive, spend and consume and waste, be very verbal, flow of ideas, don't stay too long with anything -- the fear of being boring -- and we lose the sense of sadness... It's so ego identified that we don't even see it as a syndrome! What we see as a syndrome is slowness, sadness, dryness, waiting. That we call depression, and we have a gigantic pharmaceutical industry to deal with it." -- James Hillman

We now live in the Brave New World of bio-psychiatry, which threatens to sweep away what few humanitarian strides have been made in psychiatry in the last century. By 1983, says Breggin, research was showing that mainstream psychiatrists had become convinced that psychological approaches (i.e., giving attention to past and present conflicts and trauma in the patient's life) were utterly useless. In effect, psychiatry has dispensed with the patient's personal history -- what Jung lovingly called "the patient's secret, the rock against which he is shattered". Bio-psychiatry assumes that we are utterly mechanical creatures, at the mercy of our defective genes and renegade neurochemistry, and that the cure for all mental and emotional distress is to be found in corrective drugs. Never mind that the widely touted "abnormal brain chemistry" theory has never been scientifically proven, nor that drug interventions act on the order of chemical straight jackets to subdue unwanted feelings.

Biological science has discovered that the chemical composition of tears of grief differs from tears that occur to naturally cleanse the eyes. Does this mean that grief is caused by aberrant chemicals, or that chemical changes accompany -- and may be produced by -- our emotions? It has been scientifically demonstrated that depression and grief compromise our immune systems. Strangely, this is rarely reversed to proclaim that immune system disorders cause depression and grief. I am not suggesting that this is a better perspective; rather, I am questioning the way certain correlations are medically interpreted. The fact that brain chemistry differs between contented and unhappy individuals, in no way proves that feelings are caused by chemicals in the brain.

The current popularity of psychotherapeutic medications rests on corporate greed and our modern demand for fast-fix solutions to all our troubles. How much easier it is for all involved when the doctor gives a patient a ten minute assessment and sends him off with a prescription than it would be to sit with him long enough to get some inkling of the complex psychological, social and spiritual conflicts in his life.

According to recent statistics, depression is reaching epidemic proportions worldwide. Rather than interpreting this as some kind of global siege of neurochemical dysfunction, might this not be a healthy response to a world on the brink of disaster? Our depression, grief, anxiety, anger, outrage or "manic" sense of urgency: all these are nature's way of telling us that something is

wrong, not simply with us personally, but with the whole setup here. (There has been research demonstrating that depressed individuals have a more realistic view of situations than do people who are never down.) Through these upheavals, our awareness and self-compassion is trying to unfold. As we gain trust in all fluctuations of mood and feeling, we discover that everything we experience moves us toward greater self-integrity and spiritual maturity. These difficult feelings are cries from our souls, not for chemical brain adjustments but for new values, new possibilities, new relationships founded on something more meaningful, beautiful and sacred than "normal" reality allows.

Of course, this takes time, as well as willingness to bear with extremely uncomfortable feelings and courage to stand up to society's derogatory messages. When we are internally overwhelmed, such heroic work seems daunting. We simply want relief, and when our doctor, therapist and family are pushing us toward the pharmacy, it is not so easy to Just Say No. Today, antidepressants and antipsychotics are as indiscriminately prescribed as once were Valium and Librium, the "mother's little helpers" of the 50's and 60's. But caution is advised. Don't let anyone coerce you into taking any of these drugs. Only you can decide if taking these medications is worth the risk. If you are currently taking these or other psychoactive medication, don't rely completely on your doctor for information. Many physicians are misled by drug companies and underestimate the real dangers of these chemical concoctions. (For a more comprehensive view of these and other pernicious "advances" in bio-psychiatry, I highly recommend Peter Breggin's courageous expose, Toxic Psychiatry.)

If you are currently using prescribed psychotherapeutic drugs, do not suddenly stop taking them! Otherwise, you may face severe withdrawal symptoms, as Breggin warns: "Disturbing muscular control problems can develop during the withdrawal period. Withdrawal can cause a temporary or permanent worsening of psychotic symptoms, with anxiety and even anguish, as a result of central nervous system rebound from the drugs. This can take weeks or longer to clear or may not clear at all. Insomnia is common. Withdrawal commonly produces a very distressing flulike syndrome, including runny nose, headache, fever, muscle and joint aches, and gastrointestinal upset."

He goes on to say that patients need emotional and social support from others when coming off the drug, which should be done gradually and under supervision of someone who understands the process. Most importantly, "It should be understood that withdrawal symptoms may encourage doctor and patient alike to resume the drug prematurely, when what the patient really needs is time to recover from the drug." To those of us who do not need this kind of chemical help, it might seem sheer insanity that anyone would voluntarily put these substances into their bodies. But I know of quite a few people whose process included so much mental and emotional chaos that these medications were their only salvation. If the energy is moving too fast and furiously through our systems, this in itself can cause serious mental and physical damage. A number of teachers seem to agree with Richard Moss's belief that "there is an inner wisdom to this process that halts it before there is significant physical damage. But this natural fail-safe can be overridden if one tries to amplify the natural process through excessive meditation, dangerous occult practices, through the use of amphetamines or other harsh drugs, or from the ravages of sheer terror.

While I do not know what additional precipitating factors may have been involved, I am aware of three incidents in which the unconscious and superconscious material unleashed by the process drove individuals to commit suicide. In cases this extreme, where no other help is available, the sedating effects of these medications can be life saving. As with other potent drugs (such as chemotherapy used to treat cancer), it is necessary to weigh the potential benefit against the known dangers. Then we can make an informed decision for ourselves. Some individuals have told me they deliberately tried taking these kinds of medications to terminate their Kundalini awakening. No one that I know of who has done this has had good results. One person said he had an adverse reaction and had to immediately discontinue the medication. A few people told me they had tried out a slew of antidepressant and Antipsychotic drugs, none of which made any difference whatsoever with their Kundalini symptoms. Several others got stuck in psychotic states and remained socially dysfunctional and permanently dependent on the drugs. To me, this seems like a risky alternative to allowing the Kundalini process to take its course.

Making use of medications to stabilize ourselves is one thing; trying to chemically combat the call to higher planes is another. It is less self-defeating when we can meet the challenges and changes of transformation with patience, humor, compassion for ourselves and at least a bit of trust in the wisdom of the process itself.

Our personal suffering, physical and psychological, is a microcosm of the macrocosmic suffering of all living beings on this planet. This suffering is trying to tell us something, trying to teach us something. If we refuse to listen, individually and collectively, madness will be the least of our problems.

Chapter 13

CRACKING UP

"Among the most troubling and alarming components commonly confronted by those in spiritual emergency are feelings of fear, a sense of loneliness, experiences of insanity, and a preoccupation with death. While such states of mind are often intrinsic, necessary, and pivotal parts of the healing process, they can become frightening and overpowering, particularly when human support is lacking." -- Christina & Stanislav Grof

Speaking at the 1994 Kundalini Research Network Symposium, Christina Grof discussed the "double-edged experience" of spiritual emergence, which can veer between "madness and bliss, terror and divine presence." Although her adventures in chaos eventually became a "benign creative river" that enriched her life, for twelve years she had felt victimized by a daily onslaught of uncontrollable manifestations of the risen Kundalini.

Even the blissful and joyous experiences can be judged as madness by others -- or by ourselves. Christina Grof said that she denied the reality of her own tumultuous years of awakening after the process smoothed out. She told herself she had simply been crazy or spiritually grandiose during that twelve year span.

The paranormal, mystical and psychic aspects of spiritual awakening are most daunting for those whose prior worldview excluded the possibility of such phenomena. It can help to realize as the astronaut Edgar Mitchell has observed, "There are no unnatural or supernatural phenomena, only very large gaps in our knowledge of what is natural... We should strive to fill those gaps of ignorance."

What seems like encroaching insanity is different for each of us. A man who had been blind from birth had little trouble accepting Kundalini experiences which might have been very frightening to someone else, such as spontaneous out-of-body escapades. But he was seriously concerned over his mental stability when he began having inner visions and was able to see colors for the first time in his life.

A woman felt extremely threatened and confounded after experiencing a trance state in which invisible beings planted gems in her chakras while she watched helplessly, unable to move or defend herself from them. In our culture, such an account sounds crazy... or possibly like an encounter with hostile UFO aliens. What is most interesting about this is that shamans from Native American, Siberian, Aboriginal and other cultures have long reported similar incidents, where sacred stones or magical crystals are inserted in their bodies by initiating spirits. The Sioux holy man, Fools Crow, spoke of a time when the Great Spirit had implanted seven stones in his body to make him a medicine man. (The stones suddenly appeared in his body while he was on a sacred quest.) Says his biographer Thomas Mails:

"One stone was in his back, just below the left shoulder blade, and the rest were just under the skin of his left arm and hand. On one occasion he made me feel the stones and move them around to show me how easily it could be done. It was uncanny, since they could be moved an

inch or more in any direction... The stones ranged in size from one-eighth of an inch to one-quarter of an inch. They were round, smooth, and hard as any rock is.

"He told me how the stones knew when a bad incident was about to take place. They began to move rapidly around. Then he would pray that people's hearts would change and the bad would go away so that good could replace it. Also, when he prayed each day the stones sometimes gave him messages from Wakan-Tanka and the other powers."

Kundalini can be terrifying to those whose religious training condemns as evil all psychic and paranormal manifestation. When confronted with evidence that flies in the face of whatever we have believed to be true, we have two choices: (1) to reject the testimony of our mind and senses; or (2) to re-evaluate our prior beliefs and learn what we can through honest examination of our own direct experience. The second choice gives us permission, perhaps for the first time in our lives, to trust in ourselves.

Staying Centered

We may fear that our new consciousness may result in persecution, not without cause. Being in altered states make us very vulnerable, especially if we tend to become lost to mundane reality. Dr. Dianne Skafte, a psychotherapist and professor of mythological studies, says that even slightly entranced states of awareness make her uneasy about losing contact with the outside world: "Unless I remain partly vigilant and aware, a voice warns, something terrible will happen -- not to my soul, but to my body. Harm may befall loved ones as well. Images such as these arise: I am suspended deep in an alternate reality; strangers break into the sanctuary with shouts and crashing; I am ripped away from my communion; my body is battered, violated. Others... are screaming also. We should have been watching, we should have been watching! Is this a memory from another existence or from the collective memory pool of humankind? Is it a glimpse of things to come? I only know that a vague dread has always kept me from surrendering to totally dissociated states of consciousness.

As John Nelson observes in *Healing the Split*, "Technological societies warn us to be wary of people who are prone to sudden trances, mystic raptures, and hallucinatory intoxications." When we suddenly find ourselves "prone" to such things, we may not know where to turn for a reality-check.

The Christian saint, Teresa of Avila, had specific criteria for evaluating her own mystical visions:

1. These experiences "have a sense of power and authority."
2. "They produce tranquility, recollectedness, and a desire to praise God."
3. "They impart an inner certainty that what is envisioned is true."
4. The visions "are clear and distinct, with each part carrying great meaning."

5. Healthy altered state experiences "result in a life of improved ethics and increased psychological integration.

They give strength and peace and inspire love for God." This canon (especially points 2 and 5) seems to apply equally well for distinguishing between healthy and psychotic altered states. Another major difference between an episode of psychosis and a transcendent altered state concerns grounding. I have been in extreme states, but I have never lost awareness of the "rules" of consensual reality, nor have I been unable to communicate my experiences coherently to others who remain in ordinary consciousness. Those who lose their bearings traversing multiple realities also lose their ability to make themselves understood.

Joseph Campbell compared the plight of the mystic and the mentally afflicted to the difference "between a diver who can swim and one who cannot." The mystic, wrote Campbell, "enters the waters and finds he can swim; whereas the schizophrenic, unprepared, unguided, and ungifted, has fallen or has intentionally plunged, and is drowning." Darrel Irving spells out this difference in more literal terms: "One person perceives Kundalini as a healing, bioelectric current of energy passing through the body and another person feels that someone is trying to electrocute him or her. It may be that a delusional person is more self-centered, less able to see the broader perspective; it may be a problem of self-integration."

Irving suggests that whatever the cause of the psychotic break, if one is to successfully navigate the tidal waves of Kundalini-shifted consciousness, "it is vitally important to see clearly, to have a strong sense of self, and to have an unremitting desire to know what is real, to see the true as true, and the false as false."

While psychic and mystical experiences can contribute to our spiritual development, it is important to be discerning. Entities from the lower astral realms and our own subconscious shadow material can contaminate our perceptions. Just because information comes to us through a trance or in other seemingly magical ways doesn't prove its source is reliable. Whatever information or insight we receive from any level, exterior or interior, disembodied or human, needs to be held up to scrutiny by our hearts and minds. Be very careful with this. Blind faith and unquestioning trust in first impressions are not sound spiritual tools.

At the opposite extreme, relentless self-doubt can create problems when we are faced with non-ordinary perception. Gail Rossi, publisher and editor of the New Age newspaper *Odyssey*, had an enlightenment experience of cosmic unity which turned into a long ordeal of mental torment when she was unable to give it credence. In retrospect, she confessed: "That fear of losing my mind, once it was allowed to enter, grew and fed on itself until there I was, smack dab in the midst of the single most profound mystical experience of my life, and instead of feeling love and light and peace and acceptance I felt paralyzed by something beyond my control." In a similar situation, a man who was experiencing highly symbolic synchronicities as a result of his awakened Kundalini simply could not believe the testimony of his own eyes. So great was the dichotomy between his experience and what he believed to be possible that he "flipped out" and had to be repeatedly hospitalized.

We can better maintain our equilibrium in the face of intense mystical and new paradigm experiences if we take the middle road, being neither excessively wary and rejecting of these revelations, nor too quick to decide that we completely grasp their meaning. Everything that happens to us is meaningful, but sometimes the significance is not what at first glance it appears to be. During a period when I was extremely psychic, some of the seemingly clairvoyant flashes that came to me later proved unfounded. At one point I thought I was getting psychic messages that my father had been killed in an automobile crash. As I write this five years later, he is alive and well, and has not been involved in any car accidents. Fortunately for me at the time, I did not immediately assume my psychic impression was correct; I took a reserved wait-and-see attitude.

I have seen people go off the deep end when they abandoned reason to embrace their nascent psychic awareness. This is apt to happen when one confuses surrendering to Kundalini (which is to say, to the inner Spirit) with relinquishing critical thought. Surrendering to an experience is allowing it to unfold completely. This is an agreement within ourselves to stop fighting against the current; it is not a form of mental collapse that turns us into vegetables. The more access we have to expanded levels of consciousness, the more crucial it becomes to balance trust and open-minded acceptance with vigilant self-honesty and responsible rationality. Keep your heart open but question everything.

Especially in the Eastern traditions, psychic manifestations are regarded with disdain, since they do not lead the seeker to the deepest revelations of Self and Cosmos. Yet even teachers who advise their followers to ignore "distracting" psychic abilities admit that at a certain stage in spiritual development, these gifts are naturally bestowed upon us. Much depends upon the attitude we take toward these abilities. The greatest danger of psi gifts is that they will distract us from the primacy of love. Bradford Keeney warns of this: "The experience of being psychic, of having precognitive dreams, and even of having healing powers are side effects of one's spiritual journey. They are not the core of what spirituality is all about. Getting attached to miracles and special powers is an example of getting trapped by what the Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa called 'spiritual materialism.' The path of spirit always follows the heart, not the hunt for personal power or magical entertainment for the psyche. When dreams are used to feed the heart, they bring us closer to spirit. As our heart becomes more filled with spirit, we are less impressed and tempted by the flash of extraordinary power."

From personal experience, I have not found psychic perception to hinder more profound levels of enlightenment. I think parapsychologist and physicist Milan Ryzl is right in his assertion that "Once ESP becomes fully integrated into the everyday life of each individual, only truth, honesty, respect and understanding can enter the human relationships and solve problems in all respects of daily life." For humanity as a whole, the widespread flowering of extrasensory awareness could be a great boon in our evolution if, as Keeney so wisely cautions, we live from our hearts.

The Deep End

It can be especially threatening to our grip on reality to experience mythological or archetypal dramas, such as a case recounted by the Christina and Stanislav Grof, in which a woman took on an unexpected, transcendent identification with death: "All around me I could see swirling

images of death: gravestones, crosses, a grinning skull and crossbones. I saw hundreds of bloody battlefields, concentration camps, and hospital wards; there were scenes of dying everywhere. I felt as though I was both reviewing and participating in all of death throughout history. And then my experience shifted and I suddenly felt as though I, whoever that was, was responsible for it all; I had become Death itself, the Grim Reaper, the Pale Horseman, and it was I who was calling humanity away from life."

Marie-Louise von Franz, who worked closely with Carl Jung for 31 years, brought up another important point: "One of the most destructive syndromes in a psychotic interval occurs when people are overwhelmed by emotional or hallucinatory experiences and cannot express them... The worst is when the thing is so overwhelming that they simply turn white and sink into bed and become catatonic. One knows they are going through the most tremendous inner experiences, but outwardly they lie in bed like a piece of wood and refuse nourishment..."

A woman whose Kundalini had risen was prone to such mentally implosions. She told me that during these episodes, she neither ate nor slept. Her eyes would become sunken, her body skeletal, and both she and others who witnessed her in this state feared she was dying.

The psychotic state can be transmuted, said von Franz, if the person "can say something about it, and can describe it even in a stammering way... then they are no longer lost and the healing process is already underway." Of course, von Franz also warns that sometimes it is not the content of the altered experience itself that is the problem, but the manner in which it is communicated. She gives the example of a woman who ran around to different psychiatrists, "accusing them all of being idiotic rationalists who do not believe in God," and then boasting of her visions. Such provocation can quickly get one medically certified as schizophrenic!

Being frozen in a noncommunicative state is not a definite indication of psychosis. Yogis, shamans, mystics, as well as those who are experiencing spontaneous spiritual emergence, are known to enter very deep trance states in which the body remains motionless for hours or days. Far from being trapped in mental chaos, these superconscious experiences can be indescribably sublime and spiritually productive. In other times and other cultures, individuals with innately passive, otherworldly natures, were recognized as born ecstasies. As such, they were valued and sheltered by family and tribe to ensure their survival. I have on occasion spoken to individuals with risen Kundalini who were in transient psychotic states. My immediate impression was that they had lost their bridge -- they were unable to recall or distinguish the gap between inner and outer, ordinary and altered realities. Talking with such people was like trying to converse with someone stuck in a dream. Therapists who are skilled at translating the symbolic language of the psyche can establish a rapport with someone caught in psychosis, although Christina and Stanislav Grof caution that this is most difficult when the psychosis is fraught with paranoia.

I met a woman undergoing Kundalini awakening who evinced a mental condition known as a borderline disorder. She devoured everyone she knew in desperately needy, engulfing relationships. When I met her, she was seeing three different therapists weekly, and was furious with them all because none of them instantly returned her frequent, middle-of-the-night telephone calls. When I finally had to tell her that I could not, as she insisted, be exclusively available to her 24 hours a day (she panicked and felt "abandoned" if I needed to use the

bathroom, eat a meal or sleep), she turned against me. As is typical of the syndrome, she immediately crossed me off her "only person who understands me" list and added me to her enemy hit-list. (This was my first personal encounter with a borderline personality. Even for professionals, borderlines are hard to treat.) For most people, the dissociative states that may accompany spiritual awakening resolve of their own accord, usually in a matter of hours or days. Yet for the person suspended between dimensions, and for concerned friends and loved ones, even these brief flights into the netherworld may be a terrible eternity. The most common recommendation for reeling someone back from the edge (short of medication) is to ply them with sweets or induce them to eat red meat. These foods are biochemically grounding.

Jung discovered that one of the best ways to prevent, or ease an episode of psychosis, was to give the unstable individual a crash course in as much religion, mythology and metaphysics as possible. An altered state is much less likely to veer into psychosis when the person has a broad mental map of the territory. The following two cases of spontaneous Kundalini awakening might have brought joy rather than terror if these individuals had received adequate metaphysical/spiritual preparation: After Margo's Kundalini had spontaneously risen, she was bewildered by a sense of constant *deja vu*. She fell into trances easily, several times blacking out. Walking around in a world that seemed to have become a hologram, she saw halos of light around everyone and at times saw Christ in people's faces. Having never been religious, these experiences -- which would have spelled rapture to a mystic -- were a source of dread to her.

In the second case, Dana had a vision of a bandwagon full of people who seemed to be greatly enjoying themselves, but as soon as she recognized one of them as a friend who had died, she became deeply alarmed. The people on the wagon -- each one a friend or relative of hers -- tried to reassure her that they were happy and all was well, but this only frightened Dana more. She knew that they were on the wagon of death, and tried desperately to warn them and call them back, but they remained wholly unconcerned, laughing merrily. Within a year, every person Dana had seen in her vision had died from accidents or sudden illness. The loss of this many close friends and relatives would be a shock for anyone, and more so after her premonitory vision. But rather than take comfort from the message of immortality and wellbeing communicated by the people in her lucid dream, Dana became morbidly depressed and afraid of her own mind.

Someone who is familiar with the concept of the subtle body, chakras, inner light, extrasensory perception, past lives, astral entities, spirit guides, and transformational themes such as shamanic dismemberment and death/rebirth, etc., will be less likely to freak out if such experiences are encountered. While reading or hearing about such phenomena cannot wholly prepare us for the actual experiences, prior knowledge gives us an intellectual frame of reference if and when these prodigious things start to happen. The more information we have about nonordinary reality and universal rites of passage such as the Dark Night of the Soul, the less shattering these experiences are likely to be if we encounter them on our own journey. This same safeguard is found in the yogic instruction in which the initiate is provided with a sacred verse to contemplate. The verse accompanies a spiritual practice intended to open a chakra; the resultant direct experience illuminates the meaning of the verse. Vedic Scholar Joan Harrigan says this formula of theory (i.e., the map of the process), practice and experience provides a safety factor, for without the theory or archetypal map, the experience can be too overwhelming and the

initiate may be in danger of falling off the path, suffering psychological harm, or becoming impeded in his/her progress.

Brugh Joy points out that all the world's esoteric schools employ a special image or symbol as an aid in centering: "The image may be that of the Buddha or of Christ or Mohammed. It may be a mandala, a dot in the center of a circle, a cross... What's important is that something be established and available for the individual to use for centering, no matter what is happening in either the outer or the inner level of Beingness."

Encountering transcendent or primal unconscious forces without the protection of such centering tools can be dangerous. As Joy says, "the psyche is blown on the winds of the Unconscious, with little hope of integration or maturation and with the great possibility of psychological injury or death."

During several weeks of my Kundalini awakening, when I was in a continuously exalted state of consciousness, I chanted "Ram" (one of the Hindu names for God) nonstop, even in my sleep. This was of tremendous help, enabling me to remain calm and reverent through many extraordinary experiences. This type of spiritual anchoring is not being taught by many who, lacking a sense of the divine nature of the energies, nevertheless teach and promote methods for awakening Kundalini.

All the traditions warn of the very real danger of losing one's way in the nonordinary realms. There can be trouble if these experiences lead to personal inflation, which is most likely to occur when crude ego-desires intrude upon psychic gifts and spiritual insights. As the spiritual teacher Arthur Osborne warned, "the more elevated a man's consciousness becomes and the more his higher potentialities are activated the more dangerous to him is a divided state of mind with desires pulling him both ways," leaving him torn between worldly and spiritual aspiration. Grandiosity and paranoia seem to team up in cases of Kundalini psychosis. In the course of his spontaneous Kundalini process, Roger began experiencing telepathy and was able to guess with uncanny accuracy which song would play next on his car radio. He became unhinged over this when he decided it meant that he was controlling the minds of the radio DJs and of the entire listening audience. Later, he believed that because he had this power, jealous demonic entities were after him. He went on a messianic crusade, trying to convince everyone that the human race was in danger of imminent demonic takeover, and that we all must arm ourselves for a world war against the evil ones.

Unfortunately, the only help Roger was given was in the form of strong antipsychotic medication, which did nothing to disabuse him of his strange ideas. At the time he contacted me, he had been locked in this peculiar mental condition for over five years, living by his own account a marginalized life of drugged sedation. Paranoid/psychotic episodes often occur when the psyche is confronted with overwhelming or frightening (to the personality) psychological or spiritual information. When her Kundalini rose, a woman who had repressed her own aggressive impulses became convinced that she was a nuclear missile pointed at what was then cold-war Russia. This hallucinated scenario cast her into hours of mental anguish, guilt and self-hatred as she wrestled with the idea that were she, as the missile, to launch, she would be morally responsible for triggering World War III and the annihilation of the world. This was a projection

of her terror that if she allowed herself to express her anger, there would be devastating consequences. She now looks back upon this episode with considerable amusement.

Another person wrote to ask me for advice in helping a friend who was experiencing an array of Kundalini experiences, most disturbingly, a sense that he was being watched by someone and that his phone was tapped. He also announced that the human race was in a spiritual war against cold-hearted multinationals. I directed her to some therapists in her area who might be able to help if her friend continued to be overwhelmed by these experiences, although she told me that he had periods of lucidity when he realized he was getting carried away by his "over-active imagination," which was a healthy sign.

Her friend's sense of being under surveillance by something may have risen from his fear of intimacy and relationship -- of being closely seen and heard. He also might have been struggling with an increasing awareness of the presence of the Spirit (angels, spirit guides, intelligences from other realms and even his own Higher Self) and the understanding that none of us are alone here. This realization is joyous to some of us, but can be initially disturbing for materialist types who previously believed everyone to be totally separate and independent agents. This happened to a friend of mine who was an atheist prior to her Kundalini awakening. She became convinced that mad scientists were directing laser beams at her and putting something in the water that was causing the energies she felt in her body, her shifts in consciousness and other Kundalini phenomena.

The friend's "spiritual war" could have been partly a projection of his inner battle between tendencies toward service/love/creativity and "cold-hearted" selfishness/violence/greed. The conspiracy idea sometimes derives from a fearful misinterpretation of the unity and divine purposefulness and interrelatedness of all creation -- the "benevolent conspiracy of life," so to speak. He may have been getting this confused with a genuine awareness of the misuses of power on earth, where profit-crazed corporations, morally bankrupt political figures, egomaniacal leaders and others who are still operating from the dying imperialist, patriarchal model, are indeed fighting to hold onto their supremacy in the face of an emerging new way of relating to life with compassion, respect and co-operation. In this sense, a "war" does exist, and the future of the world may depend on which way the majority of humans align themselves. This will not ultimately be resolved by warfare, but by a collective inner transformation of the human psyche.

I mentioned this to the woman who wrote to me, not simply to spout my philosophies, but to show that her friend wasn't entirely nuts in his paranoid/psychotic episodes. He was trying to gain clarity on many issues that were surfacing in his consciousness to be evaluated and integrated. Through dreams or visions, finding oneself embroiled in, or witness to, cataclysmic battles between forces of good and evil, is an archetypal stage of spiritual development. In actuality, this is a deep cry from the soul for reconciliation of these opposing forces within the self as well as in the collective atmosphere. Psychiatrist John Perry has lamented the fact that American doctors have been slow to realize that "in the particular state of consciousness we call psychotic, in its first episode, there are images waiting to be communicated, if someone is there to listen to them. Death and birth, world destruction and regeneration, messianic mission and program for renewed society; all of these concern both the culture in general and the individual

in particular."

Traveling Safely

"Expanding consciousness is the riskiest enterprise on earth. We endanger the status quo. We endanger our comfort. And if we do not have the nerve to resolve the ensuing conflicts, we endanger our sanity." -- Marilyn Ferguson

Altered states can be very seductive, especially because one feels immersed in something tremendous and wonderful. A powerful grounding tool (which I believe prevented me from getting lost in my altered states) is a strong attachment to someone besides yourself who would suffer a great deal by your extended absence, be it a partner, your child, your pets or your worldly work.

There were times in my own process when I felt an almost irresistible pull toward the "nagual" -- so much that it seemed if I were not resolute in my grounding to the earth plane, I might have been mentally sucked into this powerful vortex. I believe what kept me from totally succumbing to this magnetic force was a combination of grace and my bottom-line vow that I would not allow myself to be dragged so deeply into altered spaces that Charles could no longer reach me. This was a deliberate and conscious decision, made in the knowledge that by drawing my mark in the psychic sand in this way, I might be forfeiting an opportunity for more rapid evolution. Years later, reading Jung's autobiography, I discovered that he had made the same grounding choice, holding firm to his love for his family (who needed him to stay "sane") and his responsibility to his patients. He believed these commitments saved him from crossing the point of no-return in his own initiation journey. No matter how spectacular and extraordinary my experiences have been, I've always retained a clear awareness that this phenomena was of another order than the reality most people perceive. Beyond a doubt, my mental stability has been in no small part attributable to Charles' open-minded and steadfast support during all the phases of my process. He has always shown interest in my experiences, and been a rock of strength and faith in me and in Kundalini, even when other people worried about my sanity.

When we move into the Unknown, we can get ourselves into trouble if we try to drag along social rules, religious decrees, or values absorbed from other people. We are less at peril when we jettison these old programs and turn to both our instincts and our "inner guru" for guidance. This is accomplished through prayer, consecration to the wisdom of our hearts, and by being as absolutely honest as we can. If we fail to do this, even without the intensity of Kundalini whirlwinds, Joseph Campbell warns that we may be heading for disaster: "If the person insists on a certain program, and doesn't listen to the demands of his own heart, he's going to risk a schizophrenic crackup. Such a person has put himself off center. He has aligned himself with a program for life, and it's not the one the body's interested in at all. The world is full of people who have stopped listening to themselves or have listened only to their neighbors to learn what they ought to do, how they ought to behave, and what the values are that they should be living for."

Honoring our naked truths and the values honed from our own joys and sorrows is purifying. Through self-honoring we gain independence no matter what our situation.

Coming Back to Earth

In emergencies, in some of the shamanic traditions (and in psychiatric treatments of yore), the elders (nurses/attendants) will bring the apprentice (patient) back into ordinary reality by immersing him or her in cold water. This "shock 'em back to their senses" tactic is a last resort. It is uncalled for if the initiate is not trapped in a negative state, but is enjoying a very positive peak experience. However, even ecstatic trances can be difficult to return from. In *Energies of Transformation*, Bonnie Greenwell presents the case of Rob, who spontaneously entered an altered state in which he says: "I felt I was passing through ... thought forms and sources of collective knowledge like the Akashic Records and Dead Sea Scrolls... I became waves of energy passing on and on past the edges of the universe."

This was at a retreat led by Brugh Joy. Greenwell says that "when Rob woke up from this experience, he found he could neither move nor speak, he had no energy and was completely immobilized." Finally, he was able to make a "hymph" sound that his roommate heard. "When touched, Rob was able to mumble "Get the others -- I need help." It took 20 minutes of hands-on energy treatment from six of Joy's assistants before Rob began to revive.

Anthropologist and shamanic healer Ruth-inge Heinz recommends calmly calling out the name of the person who is locked in a trance state. She then directs the "lost" soul back by telling the individual to "follow my voice" as she continues to speak softly until the person has revived. If no one else is around (or even if they are), prayer and requests for Spirit help are usually very effective in bringing one back into the body.

While the inability to return to (or assume conscious mastery of) the physical body is sometimes a problem after out-of-body experiences, the opposite complaint is more common: the slightest excitement or fear propels one back into mundane reality. In the shamanic traditions, the ability to move back and forth between altered realities without losing one's marbles is an acquired skill. In most traditions, the purpose of inner voyages is to retrieve superconscious material to help ourselves and others on the earth plane. Simply going further and further out (or in) with no intent to return may be seen as catatonia or God-intoxicated mysticism, depending on your cultural point of view. Not all psychotic states involve higher spiritual awareness, however. Even in shamanic cultures, a distinction is made between holy-crazy people, and those who are simply deranged and insane.

Adrift

"And I saw the river over which every soul must pass to reach the kingdom of heaven and the name of that river was suffering: and I saw the boat which carries souls across the river and the name of the boat was love." –St. John of the Cross

The transformational process typically churns up confusion and mental disorientation. Spacing out, losing one's train of thought, and spells of memory loss may be very disturbing. Irina Tweedie described many periods when she could not think or mentally concentrate. At times, my mind was so fragmented I couldn't remember the most elemental things, such as how to dress

myself or prepare food. On occasion, my mind would go blank in the middle of doing or saying something. Being ordinarily very focused, these lapses were disconcerting. In an extreme case I know of, a woman lost the ability to understand, speak or think in verbal language for nearly a year of her Kundalini awakening.

As consciousness expands, things can take on a gauzy, surreal quality. At this stage, some people have difficulty distinguishing actual incidents from dreams and psychic impressions. Other dimensions of reality may become superimposed on our perceptions of the ordinary world. One may develop a "prismatic" consciousness, in which myriad constructs of meaning are evident in everything one perceives. The information overload from these multiple levels may lead us to weird and wildly irrational behavior and ideas. We may sound incoherent and obsessional. Others may think us crazy, while to us our actions and ideas may seem perfectly appropriate. Or we may agree that we're losing our minds and be very disturbed about what is happening to us.

When her second chakra opened, a woman created a neighborhood scandal by running around trying to seduce every male in the vicinity. Ram Dass tells of Anandamayi Ma, "one of the greatest saints of all times" who, prior to her Kundalini awakening, was "a very dignified Bengali woman." Yet she spent two years of her process doing cartwheels naked in her front yard. In rare cases, people became self-destructive or threatening to others during extreme altered states, even to the point of committing suicide.

Certain stages of transformation can be devastating. Our ability to endure and recover from these episodes can depend on many factors: our innate resilience, our external support system, our attitude toward the awakening process, our genetic constitution, our karmic makeup, divine grace, etc. In my own case, prayer (both my own and other's prayers for me), and staying centered in my heart have been my lifeline. Others have told me that at the eleventh hour of their suffering, their prayers have been answered -- sometimes miraculously. Those whose beliefs prevent them from calling upon a greater power for help seem to have a more harrowing time of it -- not because their experiences are more hellish, but because they are so deeply alone with them. Yet even existential loneliness can be a significant spiritual experience.

Consuming suffering is one of Kundalini's specialties. I've known physical pain so vicious I longed for the respite of death. I've fallen into such bottomless chasms of grief it seemed I would never stop weeping. I've felt such murderous rage it seemed as if nothing could extinguish my anger, and despair so bleak I couldn't imagine ever having a shred of hope or happiness in my life again. And I have been scared to the point of abject terror. Great fear is a common reaction to the unfamiliar and overpowering experiences arising from expanded consciousness. For the individual undergoing transformation, Christina and Stanislav Grof assure us that some anxiety is appropriate. The reasons for this are many: "... not only are many of his or her familiar belief systems breaking down, but he or she has become exceedingly emotional. The body feels as though it is falling apart, with new physical stresses and bothersome pains. Much of the fear feels completely illogical, however, as it has very little to do with the person involved. Sometimes the individual in crisis can deal with various fears relatively easily, and on other occasions the feelings of fear seem to expand into utterly uncontrollable panic."

Erupting unconscious material may include frightening thoughts or horrifying images. And the seemingly unfounded, free-floating fear mentioned by the Christina and Stanislav Grof feels all the more ominous when we can't figure where it is coming from. At points I've experienced a nebulous sense of impending doom, as if something indescribably horrible was about to happen. This state is generally self-perpetuating -- one feels very uneasy, then becomes afraid of the uneasy feeling, increasing the fear, in an escalating spiral of terror. A literal or potential loss of control -- over oneself, one's environment or one's grasp of reality -- is a common Kundalini experiences that can shake us to the core.

These fears can really come out of left field. Once, late in the middle of one night, after breezing along for four years of publishing Shared Transformation, out of nowhere I got hit with a gut-freezing horror that I wouldn't be able to go on writing or editing the newsletters, leaving our hundreds of subscribers in the lurch and us in legal hot water. This was not a simple exercise in self-doubt -- I've had plenty of those. It was pure self-annihilating terror that was feeding my soul into some kind of diabolical papershredder.

The fact that there were infinitely worse problems in life than this did not escape me, but neither did it put my fear into perspective. The thing that brought me back to terra firma was a very detached and curious observation corner of my mind that watched this internal psychodrama with interest and kept saying, "Now I wonder why I never worried about this before?" It was such an ultimately funny question -- on the order of asking myself "What took me so long to go nuts?" that it had a stabilizing effect.

Trying to staunch fear by telling ourselves we shouldn't be afraid, or worse, that our fears will bring the about the very things we are afraid of, rarely works. The irony is that even if this is true, reminding ourselves of it during times of fear generally compounds the issue by making us afraid to be afraid. Sometimes we can ride out these upheavals, reminding ourselves that they are a natural, cathartic and transitory phase of the process. It helps to remember, as Assagioli says, "The nervous, emotional, and mental problems arising on the way of Self-realization, however serious they may appear, are merely temporary reactions, by-products, so to speak, of an organic process of inner growth and regeneration." Singing, chanting, walking, dancing, or involving ourselves in physical activity can discharge some of the anxious energy. Reasoning with ourselves can sometimes alleviate our fears. I remind myself that throughout my life, the things I have most feared might happen to me either never happened, or happened very differently than the way I had imagined they would. Doing anything intended as service to others can be an excellent way of rechanneling raw emotion. Various kinds of bodywork and therapy can help us release and work through underlying issues. Prayer and/or the companionship of a stable, caring friend can be of great benefit. Sometimes all we really need is a hug or a hand to hold. When we are alone, a simple remedy (although often hardest to do) is giving ourselves permission to be afraid. In 1984, when I was ricocheting with panic attacks (which I now recognize were due to a partial Kundalini awakening), I reframed my fear as a trembling, terrified creature which I carried in my arms. When I went out, I would imagine taking this "Fear-being" with me, and would mentally speak to it reassuringly as I went about my business. Creatively recasting the problem from me being afraid to my need to calm a Fear-being entrusted to my care had an immediate and salutary effect. The amazing thing is that however we do it, the more accepting we are of fear, the less we feel afraid.

Although it would seem that our spiritual lives would be easier to sustain in a world free of suffering, our fears and troubles strengthen our connection to the Spirit. The Native American holy man, Fools Crow, understood why this was so. "When life is too good," said Fools Crow, "we think too highly of ourselves and our blessings. Then we decide we are the wisest and favored ones, and we don't think we need Wakan-Tanka [the Great Spirit] and the Helpers any more."

My mother-in-law grew up on a Colorado farm, in an area where wilderness fires were a hazard, particularly for isolate rural families prior to the advent of telephones. As a child, she came to dread the sight of smoke, and this constant threat led her to pray for protection from a young age. Likewise, my own life has never allowed me a sense of worldly security on any level. For a long time, I resented my lack of a material or social safety net, but I have come to appreciate my precarious situation as my soul's way of preventing me from wandering far from the Spirit. I know full well that my fate is daily in the hands of God/Goddess.

It seems to me that much of the transformational process revolves around compassionate acceptance and trust. All of the physical, emotional and mental torments can be finally traced to these issues. Can we have faith in ourselves, faith in the cosmos, faith in our own tumultuous journeys? Each time we can answer "Yes" with every level of our being, we move a bit further, into more clarity, more peace and joy.

We go through cycles of being stripped, dissolved, disintegrated by crises and ecstasies, by darkness and light. Each time we are reduced to nothingness, we find ourselves, as Zen Buddhist Joan Tollifson has written, "beyond all these opinions and categories that we identify with and defend to the death." Sometimes, says Tollifson, we come to that place where "there's no separation anywhere, no need to keep existing, no possibility of not existing, no need any more to become anything."

But always we reconstitute. We come back to ourselves, familiar but changed. With each return, we discover ourselves to be both more and less than what we had thought.

Saying Yes to Kundalini, Yes to life, Yes to myself has been the key to my personal healing. I don't assume I'll be spared all pain; I don't even trust that my faith is unwavering and strong enough to sustain me through all possible ordeals. But I trust the awakening process implicitly. Something wondrous is taking place here. My heart knows this without doubt. When I look through my heart I know that the world and each one of us is amazing and wonderful. My heart has also shown me a world that is an ugly, corrupt, hostile place, teeming with atrocities that suck the very marrow from my bones. I have learned that it is not necessary or wise to supplant one of these views with the other. They are not mutually exclusive. The beauty of life cannot be increased by turning a blind eye to life's horrors, but our beauty as conscious beings multiplies the more we are willing to open our hearts in both directions. I may not completely understand what is happening or why it is happening. Yet come whatever troubles, come whatever crises to break and remake me, I know that somehow, somewhere, there is a center of unshakable, invincible love. And no matter how terrible, I know that the nightmares eventually dissolve. Love alone prevails. This is the deepest truth I know; this is the purest solace I have for myself; this is the source of the comfort I extend to others.

Chapter 14

THE DARKNESS BEFORE THE DAWN

"One thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light."

-- Joseph Campbell

A problem confronts every serious spiritual seeker: for long stretches of the journey, the quest requires great self-investment for seemingly little in return. For individuals who have voluntarily chosen a particular spiritual discipline, commitment wavers during these laborious and weary periods. But for those in whom the Kundalini has autonomously risen, there is no alternative, no possibility of backing out. Kundalini has an unstoppable momentum. When Shakti enlivens us, we are no longer following anything; rather, it seems like we are being carried along willy nilly like leaves in the wind.

At times, despite the dynamism of this Force that has reshaped our destiny, we are rife with doubt. What begins in fear or amazement goes through seasons of joy, hope, disillusionment, and despair. When, we ask ourselves, does the process bear significant fruit? How long must we suffer through the daily pummeling of body and psyche? As weeks turn into months and years, our faith in the benevolence and guiding presence of the Spirit is sorely tested. Radiant gifts of bliss, beauty and unmistakable blessing are overshadowed by long sieges of pain, torment and physical/emotional depletion. Even if we want to surrender to the workings of the process, often we do not know how.

Charles Breaux says that after an initial six months of "incredible 'peak experience,' the dross began spewing out" into his external life. He wrote: "These last seven years have been one intense drama after another, the deepest and darkest karmic patterns within me have been relentlessly quickened by the power of Kundalini." At the end of his book *Journey into Consciousness*, he confesses that he continues to wonder if the necessity for letting go will ever cease.

Rhythms and Cycles

Sometimes while writing this I feel it's too big, I can't do it. It's as if I'm standing waist deep in a trench filled with mud and rocks and blood and carnage, yet down in this very morass there lies the most beautiful thing, a thing that has pierced my flesh and entered me like a lover, a thing so wondrous no one would believe it. And if it were only me, it would be my special secret, and there would be no point in trying to describe it. But the trench of rocks and blood is the world in torment, and the beautiful thing is what changes it from a horrible spectre to a heroic quest. The hero is the soul; the beautiful thing is Spirit, and I am not the only one who has been pierced.

Kundalini gives us sudden wings to transcend the writhings of life, but she also turns around and delivers us into the depths of the trenches and makes us find the treasure buried there as well. Spells of depression are a common feature of the transformational journey. I am, in fact,

experiencing one as I write this. I am doubting the value of this book and questioning my more optimistic musings on the benefits of Kundalini. From where I sit at this moment, it seems as if years of the process -- and of my life in general, for that matter -- have been little more than an endurance test.

I feel that everything I have written about the beauty and potential of spiritual awakening has been fraudulent... that in truth, the splendor is short-lived, and the time spent suspended in pain is interminable. Yet I know that this is the nature of the shamanic path. Of the countless interviews and autobiographies I've read, the two most repeated words to issue from the mouths of shamans are "spirit" and "suffering."

Despair is not the monopoly of those who fall off the tracks; it is integral to the journey itself. Like physical pain, it is a circuit breaker that interrupts the usual program to bring a special message. The news is not good and we don't want to hear it, but hear it we must.

Every time I fall into one of these pits, I want to curl up and die. Yet I've noticed that they invariably precede a breakthrough of some sort. They seem to be a means of emptying me so something new can fill my cup. In this sense, longing for death is a psychospiritual congruency and precisely what I need. Despair returns us to ground zero, to the place of nothingness which seems barren but is in actuality a realm of dormancy, a wintering of the soul without which there can be no spring.

Being able to go with the flow of the transformative process is easier when we have some understanding and acceptance of the cycles of nature. Everything that lives follows its own internal rhythms of growth and decline. The Kundalini process also develops in cycles of expansion and contraction. The state of expansion may feel eternal, but eventually it dissipates. As Roberto Assagioli says: "Such an exalted state lasts for varying periods, but it is bound to cease... The inflow of light and love is rhythmical as is everything in the universe. After a while it diminishes or ceases and the flood is followed by the ebb."

If the process begins with an explosive surge of energy which plays havoc with the system, we feel as if we've been blasted out of our skins or out of our minds. In the early stages, we may be physically sick, mentally stunned, emotionally raw. We're in free fall in a surreal limbo, not knowing where or if we'll eventually land.

It can help to understand that the first stage of any transformational process is chaos. Things blow up, fall apart, go berserk. In alchemy, this chaotic phase is referred to as the prima materia which forms the basis of the work which will eventually produce the "gold" -- the desired outcome (or spiritual treasure). "The prima materia is in a state of conflict all the time," astrologer Liz Greene explains, "blind, potent, undirected, but full of raw power and constantly embattled."

When we find ourselves in this initial phase of transformation, everything becomes precarious. The old anchors and safety nets no longer hold. We can feel lost, confused, terrified, despairing. Cultures more attuned to the cycles of nature regarded adversity as a possibility for growth. The Chinese word for crisis is wei-chi, meaning a perilous opportunity. In fact, it is well known that

the more radical the transformation, the more severe the crisis which precedes it. Shamans and spiritual teachers have long understood this principle: the greater the crisis, the greater the potential for beneficial growth.

Of course, there are no guarantees. Contrary to popular belief, initiation is never totally predictable or safe. The very idea of initiation as something glamorously exotic leading to immediate spiritual ecstasy is quite misleading. More often, as Alice Bailey warned, our initiations are expensive rites of passage, bringing upon us "increasing work and increasing responsibility." In *Fire in the Soul*, Joan Borysenko says that "crisis resolves in one of three ways." The ordeal may end when "we slowly put ourselves back together again and life goes on in the same overtly or vaguely unsatisfactory way that it did before," or "we become so terrified, agitated or depressed that we commit suicide or stay in the desert of mental illness; or we come out transformed, emerging with a new strength, wisdom and vision."

This third and most healing possibility is the great alchemical "secret." On the heels of chaos comes a developmental restructuring. This is paralleled in Nobel Prize winner Ilya Prigogine's discovery that large perturbations of energy cause living systems to fall apart, then re-coalesce in a more elegant order. "First destruction, then creation -- this is the way of the Goddess, the Shakti," says Vicki Noble. "The fire burns through the old structures, eradicating them, transmuting their energies to a higher vibrational level." Or, as Deepak Chopra expresses it, "...life shows itself as a miracle of renewal. All the order that dissolves into chaos comes back as another kind of order." But this new pattern is rarely apparent immediately; more often, it comes into being in fits and starts. We begin to notice something shifting in our perception and response to life. Some of these changes are dramatic and extraordinary; some are more subtle and vaguely familiar, as though lost or atrophied parts of ourselves are reemerging.

Sometimes the initial expansion state is heralded by joy and a sense of freedom and elation. Rather than hitting us as a crisis, it breaks through as an epiphany. Feelings are intense and we are hyper-energized, immersed in sublime mystical experiences and staggering, soul-nurishing realizations. Although we may be soaring out of control, we have no doubt that we're in flight. There is a breathtaking sense of being swept into the numinous, carried aloft by fantastic forces. In either case, the next stage, contraction, is more dense and grounded. Whether it comes on like a sudden crash or takes hold more gradually, contraction has an anticlimactic tone. If the expansion stage was ecstatic, with the contraction that follows, things seem to fall into a state of decline. If the expansion state seemed fraught with significance, the contraction phase may be characterized by its weight of fearful uncertainty or oppressive meaninglessness. We may still feel the spiritual process at work within us, but now the dazzling perks are gone. No more ecstatic visions, no more extraordinary sensual bliss, no more beautiful visitations, no amazing signs of divine intervention.

Depression deepens into despair as we watch the magic of our recent transcendent experiences slipping into a grey self-doubting fog. Like a little child checking the mirror every day to see if he has grown, we keep taking inventory of our condition, searching for any positive changes. The whole thing may seem like some kind of absurd fluke -- a cosmic joke on us. We may begin to seriously question if we are truly in a transformational process at all. Are we hopeless cases, beyond redemption? Has something gone sour with the process itself? Whether it feels like

divine liberation or hellish upheaval, in the expansion stage, particularly in an intense Kundalini awakening, the manifestations are so powerful that we are ripped away from our ordinary concerns. In the contraction stage, we feel more grounded, but so also may our usual fears and troubles come flooding back, often amplified because we may be in a worse predicament than before the process began. It often seems like we've made no progress at all. We may feel ourselves physically or mentally deteriorating in a terrifying way, and fear that we've fallen from grace as well.

The expansion stages last more briefly than the contracted state -- particularly the more draining periods which may seem to drag on forever. But this is also the natural rhythm. As the contraction stage continues, it may seem to be pulling us lower and lower. It is during such periods that we are most likely to feel as if we are "losing it." Our past conditioning and the opinions of those around us may work very much against us in this phase. Painful and seemingly self-annihilating experiences are roundly condemned, as Marc Ian Barasch observes, "in a culture that celebrates surfaces, speed, and success... We try at all costs to resist our descent, because we believe that once we hit bottom, there will be no return." But if we allow ourselves to be drawn into this dark chasm, at the very nadir of futility and anguish, the process shifts once more. We are moved from crisis to surrender to the "labor" stage preceding our rebirth. In this rebirthing period, we receive inner and outer guidance that allows us to break free from old traumas, outgrown habits, and limiting or injurious conditioning. "When our souls are on fire," says Joan Borysenko, "old beliefs and opinions can be consumed, bringing us closer to our essential nature and to the heart of healing." At last, new ways of thinking, perceiving, relating, responding and being take shape from our very core.

As Elizabeth Kubler-Ross puts it, we emerge "polished" from the "tumbler" of our ordeals. And as long as we are incarnate on this planet, we will continue this process of spiritual refinement. At intervals, the entire cycle begins again, dissolving and re-crystallizing, waxing and waning. We are being inwardly tempered. It can help to remember this when we find ourselves in the more difficult parts of the process. It's all necessary, it's all purposeful. Contrary to popular myth, transformation isn't an easy, lightning flash switch. We don't turn presto-chango from frog to prince (or princess). That's why awakening is called a journey -- it takes time to reach the destination. There will be many challenging times ahead of us. Our souls and our faith will be tested. The resultant suffering is part of the universal "curriculum."

"Adversity marks the history of all the saints and world-servers, and the story of Job is proverbial", wrote Michal Eastcott. "Yet still, when we come under the shadow of these periods, we are apt to forget they are part of the communion of saints, and are a necessary time of preparation and building of fortitude..."

Our understanding of the process makes all the difference in the way we deal with our experiences. "The birth and characteristics of the new self are determined in large part by the stories we tell ourselves about why the time of darkness has come," says Joan Borysenko. "If we have a strong belief that our suffering is in the service of growth, dark night experiences can lead us to depths of psychological and spiritual healing and revelation that we literally could not have dreamed of and that are difficult to describe in words without sounding trite."

Dark Night of the Soul

"To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings." -- Wendell Berry

There is a self-annihilating existential crisis which can occur at any stage of awakening. It occurred to me after the most profound spiritual experience of my life, which I describe in Chapter Twenty. Christina and Stanislav Grof describe it well: "Not only do those facing such an existential crisis feel isolated, but they also feel insignificant, like useless specks in a vast cosmos. The universe itself appears to be absurd and pointless, and any human activities seem trivial. Such people may see humankind as being involved in a rat-race existence that has no useful purpose. From this vantage point, they cannot see any kind of cosmic order and have no contact with a spiritual force. They may become extremely depressed, despairing, and even suicidal. Frequently, they have the insight that even suicide is no solution; it seems there is no way out of their misery."

Since this grim sense of alienation feels so spiritually bleak, those who pass through this stage rarely recognize it as a purgation of the soul. It seems instead to be a nihilistic deadend, an insurmountable pit of hopelessness. We become convinced that all prior spiritual longings and experiences were mere wishful thinking, and that no one and nothing can rescue us from what we now regard as the brutal truth. Mark Twain, a remarkably spiritual man, must have been at such an impasse when he wrote, "God is a malign thug."

I spent years in this bleak state, and I can now see it as neither the cold truth that it seems, nor a wholly mistaken outlook. These mental crucifixions are purposeful. Hitting bottom narrows down our choices considerably: either we emotionally expire or we open to the impossible beauty of the heart.

When I first dared to trust love, it was not out of optimism, but out of total despair. I simply knew I could no longer live with the alternative. In retrospect, I am glad this choice was forced on me at a young age. It instilled in me a steadfastness which has carried me through all the subsequent troubles of my life.

It is immensely helpful if we are able to remember, even in the darkest, most frozen periods, that this is the archetypal pattern of the soul's growth. We are not really lost, nor hopeless. In fact, according to psychologist Ira Progoff: "The active germination of a growth process often takes place at the low, seemingly negative, phases of a psychological cycle. Thus, at the very time when the most constructive developments are taking place within a person, his outer appearance may be depressed, confused, and even disturbed."

Even from the strictly biological standpoint, perfect balance does not exist except in death or inert matter (and not completely in these). As Paul Pearsall has pointed out: "Ecologists all over the world are now changing their view that the normal condition of nature is equilibrium. Studies of the forests, climate, and atmosphere of our earth reveal that turmoil is the natural state of nature." He quotes ecologist Stewart Pickett: "The balance of nature makes nice poetry but not such great science." In physics, chaos theory demonstrates, as scientist Douglas Hofstadter has

said, that "an eerie type of chaos can lurk just behind the facade of order -- and yet, deep inside the chaos lurks an even eerier type of order." After wrestling through a personal health ordeal that included two bouts with cancer, Pearsall concludes: "Having gone through my own best and worst times, I am convinced that there is an order in our living, and like the matter and antimatter or the quantum world, for every magic moment of insight and celebration, there are 'anti-moments' of pain and fear."

"The law of chaotic order" says Pearsall, "suggests that chaos -- the actual process of disorder -- is healthy in and of itself. The universe is not a beautiful balance; it is a chaotic miracle." With this in mind, he remarks that "We can live our life in dread of future problems, or we can accept the fact that we could not exist if we were not, like all of the cosmos, in the process of constant change and remember that the definition of the word dread is not only "fear and apprehension" but also "deep awe and reverence."

While suffering cannot be avoided at times, the tendency to dramatize our own predicament and fall into self-pity only adds to our misery. On the other hand, when we can remember that pain and hardship are purposeful and archetypal features of the spiritual path, our perspective of our present difficulties widens. The Buddhists have long understood the art of embracing the vicissitudes of life as just part of the ongoing parade. Says Tarthang Tulka: "Learning to 'flow' with our experience gives us true stability and freedom. When we discover change as the real nature of existence, our old conception of the world seems dwarfed and limited. Our world comes alive; we are whole again. A new reality emerges from the old, like a phoenix out of fire."

Rachel Naomi Remen comments upon the paradoxical truth that "The less we are attached to life, the more alive we can become." In letting go of what we thought we couldn't live without, we become more deeply able to participate in life.

While we are struggling up a stony, thorny path, there may be nothing in our experience to give us hope. But there is always support, if we know where to look for it. "Lest we have considered difficulties and darkneses for too long and become a little dismayed," advises Michal Eastcott, "let us remind our selves that the truth of this promise is always before us every night -- it is then, in the darkness, that we see the stars."

In the beginning, when the Kundalini is moving upwards, Dr. R.P. Kaushik said "it is a negative force -- it is destructive. It destroys all your attachments, all your material possessions; it is destroying everything," which can lead to "a dissatisfaction with everything you have." Kaushik notes that such feelings of frustration and desperation intensify as the energy works to clear through the six and seventh centers. "The yogis have described this movement in a beautiful language," he continues: "The serpent, when it awakens, starts devouring and eating everything that is in its way. When it has gone to the crown center, then from there it descends downwards, as a creative force -- the descending triangle or the Shakti triangle. This is the positive movement..."

It is only when this positive, creative part of the cycle is reached that the process begins to smooth out and become more consistently rewarding. This is not to say that we will all live happily ever after in a cocoon of bliss. "Waking up entails remembering your whole self in the

midst of trance states and problems and making sense out of them," Arnold Mindell reminds us. "It does not mean being without problems."

Shamanic Dismemberment

A woman experiencing a lengthy Kundalini awakening told me of a period where she was having frequent nightmares from which she awoke screaming. All these terrible dreams had the same theme: "they" were hacking her to pieces. Eventually, these dreams began to change, and instead of being chopped up, dream figures were putting her back together in a way that made her -- like the Bionic man -- "better and stronger" than ever before.

This is a classical shamanic dismemberment experience. It is a symbolic transformational drama which has been recognized in the wisdom traditions from time immemorial. In Sumerian mythology, Inanna was a sky goddess who had to pass through seven gates of the underworld, each time being stripped of deeper parts of her being until she was naked and lifeless. In the book, *Shaman's Path*, Rowena Pattee describes the Egyptian enactment of this drama in the myth of Osiris, the pharaoh who was slain, dismembered and supernaturally resurrected to conceive his son Horus. In the Greek mystery religions, Pattee says that "Dionysus was torn to pieces by the Titans while his heart was rescued by Athena, goddess of wisdom, suggestive of the wisdom born of the dismemberment experience."

In all of these stories, something magnificent and creatively abundant occurs after the original being is broken apart. These myths infer that all creation is the result of a single divine Self which has been sacrificially fragmented. The Inuit Indians of the Arctic celebrate Takanakapsaluk, the dismembered goddess whose severed parts form all the creatures of the sea. And in pre-Aztec religion, the earth itself was created out of the dismembered parts of the goddess Tlalteuctli. As the myth goes, ever since she was torn apart and turned into the earth, Tlalteuctli she has wept and can be consoled only through the "blood" of torn open (i.e., spiritually consecrated) human hearts. "To sacrifice our hearts," says Kate Duff, "is not to give ourselves away, but to keep ourselves true, by freeing our hearts from distraction and realigning ourselves with our appointed destinies. Ironically, we often find our true selves, and engage our souls, when our hearts are broken, bleeding or sacrificed."

Those of us who are being transformed may have graphic dreams or visions of being brutally cut up or torn apart. This phase may be preceded (or accompanied) by visions or dreams of catastrophic disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, nuclear holocaust, etc. Our primordial fears are triggered by these scenarios. This is one of the most physically and/or mentally arduous stages of awakening. Unfortunately, some of us also have literal dismemberment experiences when the Kundalini is purifying our bodies and psyches. Our bones, joints, vertebrae, internal organs, eyes or other parts of the body may be gravely affected by the process. Serious injuries or diseases may occur which seem to be permanently destroying us.

Our very survival seems to hang by a thread. For some, the fear of death looms large during this period. For others, death would seem a welcome respite from the terror and agony of the "dismemberment." Kundalini researcher Tontyn Hopman reminds us that "the awakening encompasses both the state of being in harmony with the Tao and the knife-edged path with its

violent purifications and sudden, catastrophic perils." The dangers of the path are not illusory, he tells us: "Everything may really be at stake... The Spirit knows no half measures or lukewarm adjustments. How else could a person be transformed except through the most intense experiences?"

So far, the spine injury I incurred in 1993 has been the most traumatic of my Kundalini "dismemberment" experiences. Anyone who has suffered a serious illness knows what a nightmare long term disability and chronic intense pain can be. In some cases, other personal crises such as deaths of family members or friends -- which sometimes occur in uncanny clusters around the individual with risen Kundalini -- are the hardest part of the process. Sickness, injuries, and loss of loved ones are human ordeals that eventually confront us all, no matter what our Kundalini status may be. But it does seem that the risen Kundalini increases the likelihood of crisis in our lives. The Shakti Goddess will utilize everything possible to shake us up, break us open and pare us down, casting off everything we thought we had or knew or were.

Says Holger Kalweit: "Many shamans were critically ill, socially unacceptable, and psychically confused over periods of several years; during their time of suffering their body and psyche adjusted themselves to an alternate mode of perception. This continuous biopsychic process of transformation often culminates in experiences of dismemberment, which represent the zenith and turning point of inner change toward a spiritual state of being."

At its deepest level, the dismemberment experience dismantles our old identity. It is a powerful death and rebirth process. The experience of being stripped to bone forces us to examine the bare essence of what we are. This divestment of every superfluous thing is a fierce teaching. We learn what is truly important and what is nonessential to our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual survival. In short, we learn discernment and simplicity. As Clarrissa Pinkora Estes says in her poem, "Refuse to Fall Down": "It is in the middle of misery that so much becomes clear. The one who says nothing good came of this is not yet listening." Anthropologist and mystic Felicitas D. Goodman notes that Siberian shamans regarded dismemberment as an essential phase of initiation for healers. To her surprise, Goodman discovered that this archetype seems universal. In her trance work with Westerners, those who had spontaneous dismemberment visions were invariably destined to become various kinds of healers. Joan Halifax's words explain why this is so: "The shaman is a healed healer who has retrieved the broken pieces of his or her body and psyche and, through a personal rite of transformation, has integrated many planes of life experience: the body and the spirit, the ordinary and nonordinary, the individual and the community, nature and supernature, the mythic and the historical, the past, the present and the future."

Completing such a restorative rite is serious business for the soul. Says Kalweit: "The lonely struggle with the forces of nature, during which one is at their mercy for better or worse, is a requirement of shamanic training, because only when the apprentice becomes aware of his smallness and helplessness, when he becomes modest and humble, can his spirit blend with these tremendous forces. An awareness of the interwoven mystical unity of nature is an essential experience during initiation of of the shamanic view of the world in general."

With her typical eloquence, Halifax declares that "To bring back to an original state that which

was in primordial times whole and is now broken and dismembered is not only an act of unification but also a divine remembrance of a time when a complete reality existed." The positive side of the dismemberment experience is that it eventually leads to a "resurrection" -- a higher state of spiritual development. The darkness which had seemed endless and impenetrable is at long last revealed to be simply a very hard passage -- the proverbial tunnel, at the end of which is a beautiful, welcoming light. In his book *Imagick*, Ted Andrews correlates the Kundalini process with what he calls the "13th Path" of the Qabalistic tradition. In the Tarot, he relates it to the archetype of the High Priestess. "It is a bittersweet path," he warns, and one that presents us with "a tremendous test of faith." On this path (which is also called "Gateway to Knowledge"), after being divested of all nonessentials and overcoming our karmic obstacles, we are able to discover our deepest truths. "This is the path of the final dark night of the soul journey," says Andrews. "It is here that we have the opportunity to awaken our strongest intuition and ... to impregnate ourselves with the light and love of the divine!"

Surviving Spiritual Crisis

"Give me everything mangled and bruised, And I will make a light of it to make you weep. And we will have rain, And begin again."-- Deena Metzger

A man whose Kundalini experiences had expanded his horizons in enjoyable ways said the process had proven smoother than "the time bomb" he had initially feared it would be. It sounded like he was bearing up well under his initiation, but for some of us (myself included), the time bomb has detonated, and living in the wake of the explosion is the greatest challenge of our lives. How do you survive in this world when you are too psychically sensitized and/or mentally and emotionally ravaged to go out in public and too sick to work? Individuals who are involved in intense and protracted Kundalini awakenings face these problems. Many who were self-sufficient, independent and well equipped to provide for themselves before the psychospiritual crisis now find themselves needy and indigent. In his autobiography, Gopi Krishna tells how he "was in too delicate and precarious a condition both mentally and physically" to be able to work, which resulted in poverty for his family for over seven years.

In *The Alchemy of Illness*, Kat Duff speaks of the damage this does to our self-esteem: "One of the most deeply ingrained cultural imperatives we must confront is the work ethic and its equation of personal worth with productivity." Paul Pearsall came up against this same frustrating compulsion to do something, anything in reaction to what was to become a long and torturous battle with cancer. "We live in a do-it-yourself culture with an emphasis on the do," he later wrote. "Such terms as adjusting, adapting, and managing are common in our vocabulary." But when we are in the midst of physical or psychological crisis, our capacity to adjust or cope is seriously compromised.

In the most intense phases of transformation, we may be so disoriented or disabled that we need to be helped with even our most personal needs. There have been periods in my process when simply crossing a room felt like scaling Mt. Olympus.

A psychic I consulted when I was having a hard time with Kundalini symptoms insisted that I "get a business card" and immediately set myself up as a spiritual healer. You've got to be

kidding, I thought. In the shape I was in, I wouldn't have been able to hold a job as a paperweight. A more spiritual way of looking at the situation is expressed by the meditation teacher, Shinzen Young: "If Nature (or 'God') has given you so much pain that you cannot do anything else other than be with it, then there is a message here: you are not expected to be doing anything else! In other words, spending time -- even long periods of time -- just feeling pain is a legitimate calling in the eyes of God and Nature. Assuming that you are making at least some effort to purify and evolve consciousness by being with pain in a skillful way, you are engaged in productive and meaningful work."

Young goes on to say that not only is this inner work valuable for us as individuals; it is also a psychic contribution to the rest of the world: "...whenever a person does something, it makes it easier for others to do that thing, even though the others may have no direct contact with or even knowledge of the original person's work... According to this theory, a person isolated and cut off from contacts, who is working to purify through pain, is in some way making it easier to all other sufferers in the world to do the same; a worthwhile and meaningful job indeed!"

With this understanding, Young encourages us to "sacramentalize" our pain by regarding it "as a kind of imposed monastery or sacred ceremony." During a Kundalini awakening, our desires to have a normal or comfortable life may be severely thwarted. All our old and familiar security anchors can disappear. We may feel lost, vulnerable, outcast and helpless. Yet somehow, miraculously, our moment by moment needs are met. We survive, even against seemingly impossible odds.

Throughout my worst period of near-paralysis, I needed Charles to serve me food, help me to the bathroom, and help bathe and dress me. At the time, neither of us knew when or if I would recover. It was a tremendously humbling experience for me. I felt embarrassed and guilty for requiring so much assistance. I worried about the emotional toll this was taking on Charles. It was also a time of great tenderness between us; I felt gratitude verging on adoration towards him. Never before in my life had anyone treated me with such selfless love.

I was (and am) deeply blessed. Not everyone who undergoes a Kundalini awakening is so fortunate. Some find themselves utterly on their own. The luckier ones have partners, friends or family who are willing and able to provide support. And there are a few who find spiritual communities -- retreats or ashrams -- where they can function at a minimal level in a peaceful and supportive environment.

Assagioli counsels: "In reality, this is a period of transition; a passing out of the old condition, without having yet firmly reached the new; an intermediate stage in which, as it has been aptly said, one is like a caterpillar undergoing the process of transformation into the winged butterfly. The insect must pass through the stage of the chrysalis, a condition of disintegration and helplessness. But the individual generally does not have the protection of a cocoon in which to undergo the process in seclusion and peace."

Since so much of psychospiritual change is a deep inner process, the grueling effects can be invisible to others. Internally, we are ricocheting wildly, bombarded with strange and overpowering sensations and fantastic, overwhelming new perceptions. Our mental and

emotional connection to the profane world may be stretched so thin it seems that at any moment we can lose hold and go spinning furiously into the Unknown. Yet outwardly, we may appear to be perfectly normal. Others may suspect us of exaggerating our condition.

All the while, we may be sorely afraid of winding up homeless and starving on the streets. Especially in current times of global economic crisis, it seems incredible that some of us are managing to get by at all. Those who have directly experienced or worked with others in extreme spiritual emergencies understand the need for a safe haven for such individuals. In an interview given near the end of his life, Gopi Krishna stressed the need for a safe environment and special care to nurture people through the raging fires of Kundalini: "The goal of such care would be to guide these individuals toward the altered, paranormal, and transcendent states of mind to which the Kundalini process naturally evolves. No one would deny that the Kundalini process can be exceedingly painful. But if allowed to progress to healing, the results can be extraordinary. To this end, an entirely new discipline of medical care, in which nurses and physicians are knowledgeable about Kundalini, is imperative."

Darrel Irving presses this even further, calling for the establishment of "Kundalini schools and universities, Kundalini medical facilities, Kundalini laboratories, Kundalini libraries..." etc. Indeed, residential Kundalini support centers and other spiritual crisis facilities are presently being created in various locales to serve these functions. But many of these sanctuaries are only in the planning stages. The few that are currently in operation are geographically and/or financially beyond the reach of many of us.

In the interim, how can we assuage our fears? I have found that it helps to focus on what I have now, rather than to dwell on what I may not have tomorrow. Although our circumstances may be far from ideal, it helps to realize how miraculously we've managed to survive thus far. Despite the pain and difficulty of my own years of transformation, I wake up each morning feeling it is a miracle that I'm alive and living in the comfort I've been given. I have food to eat, a (usually) quiet place to live, and a soft, warm bed to rest in. In this world, these are great blessings. So very many on this planet do not have these simple things.

I have faith that we are all divinely guided. This isn't to say we are invincible or infallible, but that no matter what happens, we are never truly without recourse. We may not be aware of this guidance, or it may not manifest in ways that we want. We are free to follow it or ignore it. And I believe that if we ask for help, help will be forthcoming, although we may not always recognize the help that is made available to us. The Spirit meets us on its terms, not on ours. Understood at another level, our souls have priorities which may not at all be in keeping with our ego plans. What we think we must have and be and do may be irrelevant to who we really are, and to why we're really here. There may be anxious and confusing transition periods, but all we need to accomplish this magnificent journey is continuously given. This is true for all souls at all levels of development, but for those of us whose Kundalini has risen, this support is more recognizable. Everything becomes accelerated. Things seem to come together (or fall apart) much more rapidly for us. Astonishing synchronicities occur which bring us exactly what is right for us. Spirit voices give us guidance, or visions and dreams show us what we need to do. We learn to deeply trust our inner knowingness and intuition. At times, the precise things we need seem to almost fall out of the sky for us. Sooner or later it dawns on us that no matter how isolated we are, or

how little worldly support we have, we're not going through this alone. The Spirit is always with us.

Prayer

At points we are all afraid, in pain, and desperate to find some beauty in our existence. We believe that love is better than war and we want to do something to bring some light into a world gone mad with greed, violence, ignorance and cruelty. We want our lives to have dignity and meaning beyond simply being able to call ourselves survivors. We turn to spirituality in hopes of finding respite from our suffering and fullness in our lives. Most of all, we want to feel joy and to be given to know, not as an idea but as a present reality, the holiness of existence. When Kundalini rises, we get a taste of the holiness and joy. It is for the most part fleeting. Our candles do not stay lit in every storm, but we hold onto the memory of the flame... For much of the journey, it is our only source of illumination. We learn to pray, not always knowing what to pray for, not knowing how or if our prayers will be answered, but knowing that Something is listening. "Pray always," Irina Tweedie's Sufi master told her. "Help is always there." When she asked his approval of a specific written prayer she was using, he waved her away. The form and content of the prayer is irrelevant, he tried to explain. What matters is not words, but intent. Any prayer which reverently turns the self toward the divine is a good prayer.

Through his personal experience and his encounters with holy men and women from indigenous traditions around the world, Bradford Keeney came to understand that prayer is the universal "motor for spiritual development." The best advice to give to someone who is spiritually hungry, says Keeney, is "Pray hard and pray harder." Since the late '70s, a group called Spindrift was engaged in orthodox scientific studies which quantifiably demonstrated the effectiveness of prayer. Some of their research involved rates of germination between batches of seeds, some of which were prayed for and some which were not. Different people were asked to pray over designated seed batches in multiple reproductions of this test, and the results were significant. Yet even more amazing were the results from later experiments in which the seeds were severely stressed by adding salt water. The prayed-for batches far surpassed the other seeds in germination and healthy growth.

The implications of this are profound: the more traumatized the organism, the more spectacularly prayers seem to help. For those of us undergoing painful and difficult processes, this is welcome news. It is even more wondrous in context of the magnitude of suffering of every kind throughout the planet. Our prayers are not only greatly needed now; the terrible problems plaguing the earth mean it is in the prime condition to respond miraculously to prayers!

Prayers connect us both to the divine and to each other on a powerful soul level. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has collected verified reports from those in near-death states who have been able to hear prayers for them, even from great distances. She tells of one man who had not believed in spirituality or an afterlife before he "died" (and was later revived) in a devastating automobile accident. The wreckage created a horrible traffic jam. The man in the accident was pronounced dead on the spot but because traffic was so heavy, it took quite some time to get an ambulance through to him. During this time, he had an NDE that began with an out-of-body state, during which he was able to clearly hear the thoughts of all the drivers on the freeway. Of these

hundreds of drivers, all but one were spewing thoughts of anger and frustration at the blocked traffic. This man was able to distinguish one woman's thoughts, far back in the congestion of cars, who was fervently praying for the stranger in the accident. He was so touched that this woman was praying so selflessly for him -- for someone she had never even met -- that it moved him to his own first prayer to a God he had never before believed in. He asked to be allowed to live long enough to find and thank this woman for her prayers for him. His prayer was granted -- over a year later, after an incredible recovery from massive injuries, his doctor helped him locate this woman.

Everyone I know who has endured a difficult Kundalini awakening has told me that they prayed during the darkest episodes. Many use prayer as their main "tool" to survive the process. A few have said that prayer was the only thing that saw them through. During the most difficult and overwhelming periods of my Kundalini awakening, I prayed incessantly. The form of prayer which comes most easily to me is mantra, although I use other more personal prayers as well. Prayers can be silent, spoken, chanted aloud, or sung. When my awakening was most intense, I would frequently sing very spontaneous, childlike prayers of love to Kundalini-Ma. Prayers can be offered to God or Goddess, spirits, angelic guides, saints, gurus or deities, in any combination that feels right to us. When I give prayers of thanks, I include "all the Holy Ones and helping spirits" and, as the Native Americans say, "all my relations" -- meaning all beings of all kingdoms whose existence is interconnected with mine in this great drama called life.

It is not necessary to pray with words at all. Visualizing light can be a wonderful prayer. Meditating on photographs, mandalas, statues or images of deities or one's guru are forms of prayer. Ancient peoples of all traditions knew that certain physical movements were prayers. This was the basis for the sacred dances. These movements and dances didn't originate when someone decided to position the body in symbolic ways. Dance is a far more instinctual and archetypal than we realize. When the spirit powerfully ascends, the body is automatically thrust into these sacramental postures and motions.

When my spontaneous mudras developed, I became aware that many of them were wordless prayers. The meanings of some of these mudras would come to me as they occurred. My arms would fly up over my head with my palms outstretched as if I were holding up the sky. "Everything belongs to God" is expressed in this mudra. It is a sort of wordless "Hallelujah!"

There is a Native American teaching that we are praying to the Creator every time we admire something in nature. I think this extends to any instance of gratitude: every thanks issued from the heart is a prayer. Appreciation and recognition of the continual blessings life bestows upon us -- not just the big miracles, but all the ordinary little gifts as well -- keeps us consecrated to the Spirit.

Ask and You Shall Receive

Spiritual teachers from almost every sacred tradition impress upon their followers the need to ask the Universe for help. When the African shaman Malidoma Some was asked what people might do to transform themselves and the planet, he replied: "The first thing is to get into the creation of sacred spaces in which one can begin to pray to spirit... to acknowledge spirit's influence in

our lives, and to boldly, and daringly ask spirit for guidance... it is to be willing to wake up every morning and say to spirit, 'I don't want to handle today, so why don't you just take over and I'll follow. Just guide me.'

In *Where the Spirits Ride the Wind*, anthropologist and shamanic teacher Felicitas Goodman tells how she "began to understand that these Beings were standing ready to be our helpers and our friends. All we had to do was ask them, and they responded instantly and in startlingly tangible ways." While the human plane is bereft without the intervention of Spirit, Goodman reminds us that the realms inhabited by these holy helpers are "equally incomplete without involving us, and the world about us. Although they are so much more powerful than we are, in this sense they need us."

When I consulted psychic and Kundalini "graduate" Anne Armstrong for guidance in my own difficult process, she told me that meekly supplicating the spirits rarely suffices. She said that if I was not getting definite results, I should demand spirit aid. I was taken aback by this aggressive approach, which Anne said took her a long time to learn for herself. But I have since found that this kind of heavy duty prayer is sometimes necessary. I suspect that it is not because the spirits are so inattentive that we must rant and rave to get noticed, but rather that we are being led to claim our birthright of partnership with the divine. This is for our own sakes, to brand into our minds the understanding that we are wholly deserving of this partnership, and that, in fact, the quality of our lives rests upon it. Even when we have been opened to incredible mystical experiences and realize there are beings and forces in the universe much greater than ourselves, it can take a long time for us to learn we can call upon these supernal intelligences for help. Some of my worst and most disabling symptoms have seemed designed to force me to "let go and let God." As long as we think we can (or should) cope with everything alone (which is pushed on us in our culture of rugged individualism and materialism), it does not occur to us to ask the Universe for help. But I don't think we are spiritually intended to be working without Spirit assistance. I find that even the tiniest details of my life turn out better when I pray for help, down to opening a new jar of mustard! But the Spirit (including angels, spirit guides, etc.) cannot intervene unless we invite it. This is one of the most important things I have learned from my own Kundalini awakening -- to welcome the Spirit into every part of my life. I still forget sometimes, but when I remember, everything goes so much more smoothly. In *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*, Christiane Northrup reminds us that when turning to the Spirit for help, we need to realize that "neither our intellect nor our ego can control either the connection or the results." She suggests three steps for opening ourselves to receive help:

- (1) "...hold the intent to connect with divine guidance;"
- (2) "...release our expectations of what will happen as a result;" and
- (3) "...wait for a response by being open to noticing the patterns of our lives that relate to the original intent."

To elucidate this, she gives an example from her own life when one day she used the Frances Scovell Shinn supplication, "Infinite spirit, give me a definite lead, reveal to me my perfect self-expression. Show me which talent I am to make use of now." Later in the day, a friend who was

a literary agent called her and suggested that she write a book. Northrup says that "it wasn't until much later that day that I put those two events together."

The Siberian healer and shaman Valentina told me she advises all her clients to remember the two crucial principles behind any request to the Spirit. First, we need to be very clear about our intent and ask with great sincerity and desire for what we need. Then, we need to detach completely -- just let go of all concern about the matter and trust the Universe to hear and answer. Both steps are necessary. When we can engage ourselves fully, then switch and release all desire and expectation, surrendering to the perfect wisdom and timing of Spirit, wondrous things can happen.

Chapter 15

THE EXILE OF SICKNESS

"... when we're reduced to that place of brokenness, that's where our vulnerability comes in. That's where the breaking of the heart takes place. In the breaking, the heart opens and it allows in and allows out all the love that's to be shared."

-- Gregg Cassin

The greater the light, the darker the shadow applies to the spiritual journey on every level. The more light moving through us, the more shadow material is unearthed. The more we strive to lead a pure, sacred, authentic life, the more we become aware of our myriad shortcomings. The more luminous our mystical experiences, the more dreary the banality of the secular world will seem. But eventually we discover that the greatest light emanates from the blackest emptiness. It turns out that light and darkness are not really adversaries; they are wedded yin/yang lovers who support each other. The traditional symbol of healing, the caduceus (with two serpents intertwined around a staff) is a symbol of the complimentary energies of dark and light, matter and spirit, and all opposing forces. These polarities must be balanced for genuine health.

That said, I've come to regard just about any theory, philosophy or psychology on the nature of illness (or about anything else, for that matter) as a shot in the dark. Ideas on healing that seem plausible in the abstract can swiftly turn to vinegar in our wounds. When we're struggling through a long health crisis with the misery of physical symptoms, diabolical medical tests, ineffective treatments and the countless losses large and small that eat away at our resilience, every fibre of our being is consumed in simply trying to survive another day. Life is reduced to just this: endurance. Everything else is the privilege of the healthy.

No one who has been spared this travail has an inkling of the demands severe sickness makes or the heroics one must summon to accomplish the most elemental things: managing to get food, to sleep, to get to the bathroom... When bodily affliction strikes hard, we grow desperate for relief in any shape or form, but it pays to be careful. Hypocrates' oath is still the gold standard for healing: First, do no harm.

Mainstream medicine's approach to pain and illness reflects modern culture's impatience in the face of any obstacle, be it social, political, environmental or personal. The first recourse is to heavy weaponry. If we can't outright destroy the thing, we overpower and subdue it. We declare war on illness, killing microbes, beating cancer, wiping out cystic fibrosis, conquering heart disease. We take medication to control our blood pressure levels; we fight cholesterol. If our clinical tests come up negative, we are told there is nothing the matter with us, which is a way of psychologically killing a problem. (Invalidation is a form of murder; it denies something its very existence.) Even preventative medicine with its emphasis on risk factors and early detection has military overtones, regarding disease as a lurking enemy.

Holistic and alternative medicine present a less invasive and more nurturant attitude toward sickness, with emphasis on restoring harmony and supporting the body's innate healing mechanisms. Yet even here, the idea of warfare creeps in. We are advised to strengthen our

immune systems so we can resist hostile takeovers by viruses, bacteria, or our own mutant cells turned traitors in the form of malignancies. Pain and serious illness are among the nastier facts of life, no question about it. What is debatable is our global strategy of reaching for our guns when confronted with anything that scares, hurts or simply annoys us. In our rush to shore up our defenses and man the battle lines, we overlook the chance of a truce. There is a possibility that the enemy may be a potential ally.

The Buddhists speak of wrathful deities -- divine entities which appear to be demonic but which more often prove to be guardians at the gate to spiritual treasure. Only those able to pass the tests of the wrathful ones are allowed passage.

Pain and illness may function as wrathful deities. They test not only our courage and endurance, but also our ability to see through the facade of our symptoms. They challenge our assumption that the body is "dumb" and nothing but a chunk of organic machinery which periodically breaks down. They invite us to glimpse beneath the surface to an underlying universe resplendent with purpose and intelligence.

The Wisdom of the Body

As Joan Borysenko has astutely observed, "A wound with meaning is much easier to heal than a wound that is meaningless or that, worse, is interpreted as divine punishment or other evidence of personal unworthiness." Finding meaning in our illnesses is more than a matter of consoling ourselves; it is a way of letting ourselves be taught by life.

With my lifelong avid interest in healing, I have been drawn to learn all I can about the mind/body connection. One thing that became apparent from all this study was that physical illnesses, specific symptoms, and pain itself were messengers -- sharp or nagging, urgent or insistent voices from unknown parts of ourselves (or from other selves), demanding our attention. The messages are more than alarms that the body is in trouble; they are also an S.O.S. from the psyche, alerting us that something is amiss in our very way of being in the world.

With this awareness, I have tried to "listen" to my physical sensations and discomforts with a receptive and curious inner ear, trying to learn more about myself. Sometimes the message is absurdly obvious. Years ago, after my boyfriend Neil pulled some ugly stunts which I had decided to let slide, I woke up one morning with a raging bladder infection and urinated blood. I realized instantly that this was my body's way of declaring that I was "bloody pissed off." (The body doesn't beat around the bush; don't expect it to put things politely. It talks in poetry, puns and explicit metaphoric language that would make Miss Manners blush.) I am not saying that my anger caused my bladder infection, and that it was therefore my own fault that I was sick. I have seen people pass terrible judgments on themselves (and on others) when they take this punitive self-created-reality stance. I believe that the soul uses our symptoms and illnesses to try to communicate something of importance to us, and we are not to blame for, or wrongly causing or creating these conditions. In the case of my bladder infection, I had been minimizing how deeply Neil's actions were harming me until my body "spoke" and made me realize how unhealthy our relationship had become.

Many of the Kundalini symptoms, particularly the mudras and kriyas, speak to me as voices of the Spirit proclaiming "I am with you," or sometimes, "I'm still here working on you." I understand the cathartic digestive symptoms -- particularly frequent elimination -- as blunt pronouncements that I have taken too much "shit" in my life and now I'm throwing tons of it out. (Of course, simply throwing it out is not enough; I also need to learn to refuse to let anybody give it to me in the first place.) Other messages are frustratingly impossible to decipher, no matter how fervently I play mental charades. Remarking on this dilemma, Kate Duff said: "The sacred transmutations that occur in the nether regions of illness, in the mute matter of our bodies, are often too primordial and otherworldly to articulate, communicate, or even to remember, but they still hold effect."

Since our symptoms generally express something about us below the threshold of consciousness, it is often harder to interpret our own messages than someone else's. One of the most blatant mind/body correlations I've witnessed was in a man I met through a pen pal network. In his first letter to me, he explained that since he'd lost his hearing, letters were an especially valuable way for him to communicate with others. I sent him a warm reply, answering the questions he asked me about myself and commenting on some of the topics he'd brought up. When I next heard from him, he thanked me for writing, then asked me exactly the same questions as he'd done in his previous letter. Nothing he said was responsive to anything I had written to him. I realized this man's deafness went a lot further than physical disability. For whatever reason, he was incapable of hearing anyone but himself.

Another time, I was with a friend when he got a phone call informing him that someone he trusted and admired had done something underhanded against him. White-faced, he hung up the phone. He briefly told me what happened, then bolted across the room, ostensibly to get something to show me. I saw with an awful slow motion precision that he was going to collide into a cabinet, but before I could utter a yelp of warning, he smashed into it with such force, he dislocated his knee. For weeks afterward, he was on crutches.

When one receives bad news, there is an expression: My knees buckled. This story also serves to illustrate another point about body-symptom messages. They cannot be understood in a cookbook fashion, where a headache always means repressed anger, kidney problems express fear, etc. For years, I have been plagued with arthritis in my knees. I have learned that one of the messages from this is that it is damaging for me to kneel down to others -- to regard myself as inferior to anyone else. When my daughter was pressuring me to admit that Kundalini does not exist and that all the symptoms I've experienced are due to what she regards as my inability to cope with reality, huge bruises suddenly appeared as if I had fallen (or been slammed down) on my knees. It was as if someone was trying to force me to repent. Same injured body part, three different meanings. Understanding our bodily messages is not requisite for the healing of specific ailments. As the neuroscientist Candace Pert has remarked, "Sometimes transformations occur through the emotional catharsis common to the many bodymind therapies that focus on freeing up emotions that have gotten lodged in the psychosomatic network, but not always." She reminds us of the exceptions even in alternative medicine: "In fact, the unconscious mind of the body seems all-knowing and all-powerful and in some therapies can be harnessed for healing or change without the conscious mind ever figuring out what happened. Hypnosis, yogic breathing, and many of the manipulative and energy-based therapies (ranging from bioenergetics and other

psychotherapies centered on body work to chiropractic, massage, and therapeutic touch) are all examples of techniques that can be used to effect change at a level beneath consciousness."

These changes may bring welcome relief of our suffering. Yet cures which do not address the underlying purpose of the illness are generally short-lived. The problem eventually returns, or else the body renews its protest through some new pain or disease. Our symptoms are far more than bio-mechanical failure. Decoding the messages of our illnesses may alleviate our suffering, and integrating what our symptoms are telling us may liberate our hearts and souls.

Unfortunately, those with a superficial grasp of human nature have misconstrued the idea that illness has an underlying purpose. The "secondary gain" theory thrown up by doctors and others who dabble in pop psychology is often nothing but a revamp of the old "malingerer" stigma, in which the patient purportedly produces psychosomatic symptoms as a means of receiving attention or as an excuse to renege on his responsibilities. The coldest implication is that this is done consciously and manipulatively by a patient faking illness.

Bernie Siegel, a physician bridging mainstream and New Age medicine, casts the secondary gain theory in a somewhat kinder perspective:

"[I ask people] 'Why do you need an illness? How are you benefitting from it?' For me it wasn't a guilt issue or a reflection of what kind of person they are... If you get permission to quit a job you don't like, move, take your tie off or get your spouse to stop abusing you, then it becomes a wake-up call and a blessing. It's an enlightening thing."

While his is a more charitable approach, it's still a slap in the face to people whose illness has robbed them of everything they have held dear. On the whole, the issues behind serious illness are more deep-seated and guileless than generally imagined.

I grew up surrounded by illness. My brother was crippled by polio at the age of two, and I've had close friends from childhood onwards who were disabled or sick. One of these was a playmate who died of heart disease when she was twelve years old. Another was my five year old pal Joey, who lived next door. One day he asked me, "When we grow up, will you marry me?" Not wanting to hurt his feelings, I said yes.

Head injuries from his father's vicious beatings changed Joey overnight from a bright little boy to a marginalized offcast of society. He was left permanently mentally retarded. What kind of stone-hearted zombie would ask little Joey why he "needed" his brain damaged? Some illnesses and injuries are as much -- or more -- a message to the community than to the afflicted individual. They are the Spirit's way of telling the rest of us: "Wake up! Life is short; don't let it slip away. Don't miss the beauty in anyone or anything; it will only pass this way once."

Forced to Listen

"Privation and suffering alone can open the mind of a man to all that is hidden to others."
-- Igjugarjuk Caribou Eskimo shaman

Before Kundalini started working me over in '91, I had enjoyed mostly good health. Since the rise of the shakti-serpent, I've been through hell. Continuous sickness, pain and disability turned my life into rubble. I felt like I was caught between worlds: I couldn't get well, and I couldn't die. Either would have been preferable to where I was. (Fortunately, most people don't get battered this badly by Kundalini. Some have mild physical problems; the lucky ones have none. But most people undergo some episodes of pain or illness.)

When my spine was injured in what at the time seemed a minor mishap in '93, I was changed in an instant from an able-bodied, active, independent agent to a pain-wracked, housebound invalid. In the earliest days, the excruciating pain and the simple logistics of getting in and out of bed were my greatest concerns.

I was as immobilized as one can be short of outright paralysis. I couldn't sit or stand for more than a few minutes at a time. I couldn't bend over and for seven months I could only lay flat on my back. I couldn't lift anything heavier than a few ounces. Charles bought me a book on yoga for back pain; ironically, it was too heavy for me to hold, even while flat in bed. I couldn't bear any pressure around my waist, which is where my tortured L-1 vertebra burned like a white-hot poker. I was in such pain I barely slept or ate, and my weight plummeted again. As the weeks dragged into months and the months into years, my life as I had known it was demolished. My carpentry, art and sundry other projects all had to be abandoned. Our immaculate, well-organized household became a debacle of clutter and grime, which bothered me even more than having to forsake my creative ventures. While my interior decor has always been along the lines of Martha Stuart meets Fellini, even when I lived in the dregs of poverty, I knocked myself out to make our home a sanctum. Having my nest fouled made the degeneration of my body seem all the more oppressive. Inside and out, all was in ruins.

I related to the gypsies who, though their possessions were few in number, so treasured their belongings they polished every surface to a sheen and embellished everything they owned with ornately painted and embroidered art. Like monks in a zen monastery, to the gypsies, caretaking was a sacred art.

It was thus to me also. I suspect some of my neat-freak trait was psychological as well, not so much a lust for control as an overcompensation for poverty. My meticulousness combined with my artistic flair was so effective, people seeing my home did not know what they were looking at. Two critical individuals had made disparaging remarks about my taste in furnishings, not realizing I'd never been able to buy the things that appealed to my taste. For most of my life, I could not afford furnishings at all; everything I owned, from the beds to the tables to the curtains to the dinnerware, was salvaged from other people's castoffs or handmade from sticks, planks, rags and sale-priced paint. Keeping my things as nicely as I could in lieu of having truly nice things was a legacy of my grandmother, who was born into a family of servants and who spent most of her childhood as a maid to the wealthy. She married the chauffeur when she was sixteen and lived the remainder of what she felt to be a materially deprived existence with a fanatic dedication to housecleaning. Late into her seventies, she would not hear of the family hiring a housekeeper to help her because she knew no one else would be able to maintain the place to her standards. Writing this, I see that keeping our homes sparkling was for both of us a means of upholding our dignity in a world that heaps humiliation on the poor.

Now that dignity was lost. In body, mind and spirit, I was crushed. Until the day my back snapped, I had not appreciated how much work I did in the course of an ordinary day, or how many other lives depended upon me. The people who had been leaning on me complained the loudest, but the ones most severely impacted were Charles, our pets and my lavish oasis of plants. In the California Bay Area, our growing season is uncommonly long, and for years I had spent the better part of the day outdoors (often exceeding six hours daily for eight to nine months at a stretch), performing my green thumb magic. Front and back, our yard was a lush extravaganza of vegetables, fruit trees, and every imaginable hue and form of flowers.

Heaving, hauling, shoveling, howing, raking, shredding, pruning, mulching, composting, I had transformed a lot full of rampant weeds and rocky, viscous clay soil into thick, fertile loam from which grew a spectacular oasis. It was an ultra-high maintenance production -- blistering, sweat drenching, muscle wrenching, bone aching work. But I was healthy and hardy and a woman possessed of a vision of beauty, a love of nature, and a lifelong history of driving my body like a mule.

In every sphere of my life, I threw myself into whatever I did with a ruthless passion, working myself to exhaustion without regard for my physical limitations. Until my back broke, I'd been able to get away with it. A true to form Scorpio, I'd operated at an all-or-nothing intensity in whatever I'd set out to accomplish. With a flip of a switch, the option to go for "all" was rescinded, leaving me able to do nothing.

When my back went down, the garden went too. In the first year, we hired squads of professional gardeners we could scarcely afford. Not one of them had my tender touch; they damaged as many plants as they saved, and after the second year, only a smattering of the hardiest species survived. Not being able to do the gardening myself was bad enough; I sorely missed it. The slowly disappearing scenery was even worse. Only someone with an inordinant love for plant life could comprehend the grief I felt, helplessly watching from the windows while what had been a living symphony succumbed to legions of snails, weeds and general neglect.

Of all that pain and sickness stole from me, the worst loss was of beauty. Beauty! That was the real point of everything: the garden, the artwork, the fastidious housekeeping. I had spent my life in Sisyphean labor, coaxing every possible level of beauty from places of desolation. Now sickness and pain had struck like vandals, throwing sewage on the shrine, spray-painting obscenities on the cathedral walls, desecrating every hard-won foothold of outer beauty in my small corner of the world. I was disconsolate.

Something was happening that I did not yet understand. For awhile, Nature let me impose my sense of beauty and order upon Her, then She rebelled. Inside and out, She threw off the reins and went Her own raucous way. I fell to pieces and the house fell to pieces. The garden went to seed and I went to seed. It reverted to its primal disarray of weeds and rock-hard soil. Sickness did the same to me; it turned me stiff and wild. Pain pulls us into our own wilderness, a place of shrieking birds and rumbling beasts. We sink into the ancient waters of sleep and delirium; we are sucked down, down below the surface of things. We learn to walk on the bottom of the ocean. When it goes on for months and years on end, we become half ghosts, half swamp-creatures, mythological beings that slide between worlds yet have no homes of our own. We are

outcasts yet strangely free -- the manmade realm of bluster and boxes and frantic activity no longer lays claim to us. All this I had yet to comprehend. I only knew that my self-identity was crumbling. My existence no longer revolved around taking care of everyone and everything in sight. I went through a period of seriously questioning if my life had any value in my non-caretaking role. Buoyed by Charles' unwavering love, I discovered that it did. In retrospect, I realized that being knocked down and near-paralyzed would not have been enough to stop me from going right on with my caretaking -- if only by listening and talking to people about their problems. Only the added factor of excruciating pain was enough to make me give up any attempt to avail myself to others.

At first, Charles worried that the message of my "broken" back might have been that I had worked myself into the ground, but I knew that it was more than that. (It has turned out to be much, much more.) Any life threatening or severe illness or injury is generally a whole encyclopedia of messages to the self. The intensity and duration of any physical condition is usually in direct proportion to the importance and quantity of the messages involved.

My spine pain told me volumes about myself, about my life. But it took me quite awhile to understand, believe, assimilate, and act upon what I was being shown. For over a year, I was simply drowning in physical pain. Bodyworkers, chiropractors and doctors were not able to help me. I felt at times as if I were being senselessly punished. I prayed, pleaded, and at times, I gave angry ultimatums to the Universe, demanding healing. At precious intervals, I was given signs and dreams that fueled my faith that somehow, I was being given this ordeal for a purpose.

Of all the parts of the body, the back is a veritable metaphoric bonanza. Back pain is also one of the most commonly experienced Kundalini disturbances and the symbolic issues it raises confront many of us whose lives are being transformed.

To back out is to withdraw from something before completion, which was certainly a position my spine injury forced me into. All my plans and projects had to be shelved.

A backlog is a pile of unfinished work. (I much later realized that because my priorities were askew, the real backlog was my neglected needs.) If something is in back, it is behind the scenes or unconscious. Like background, it also alludes to something in the past.

Going back to something means returning to a former condition; going back over something means checking something out more carefully.

To backtrack is to reverse one's policy or position; it also refers to going back over the course by which one has come and thus, by analogy, relates to reviewing one's life. The Kundalini process compels us to find what we've left behind, to shed light on the unconscious and look into ourselves more deeply.

To go back on is to fail to keep a commitment or a promise; to betray. As I was to discover, the way I had been living my life had been a self-betrayal.

To back up has multiple meanings: to support, encourage, assist; to prove; to move backwards, retreat, reconsider; and to accumulate in a clogged state (the traffic was backed up). Each of these implications gradually took on significance as I discovered what my broken back was trying to tell me.

Having backbone signifies strength of character and determination, not being a pushover. (I had to learn not to let people take advantage of my generosity and kindness.) Becoming aware of our potential and recognizing the obstacles is not enough; we need the backbone to act on what we know.

To hold back is to be more reserved, restrained and less accommodating. To turn one's back on is to reject or abandon. These were tough ones for me. I hated turning my back on anyone, but I learned that sometimes it is necessary.

I try to see how an illness disrupts or changes my usual routines to understand what it wants from me. Clearly, when I was so pain-stricken I could not move or think straight, it was interrupting every pattern in my life and forcing me to let go of everything. As I slowly regained mobility, I found I could bend forward without much problem, but to this day I cannot arch my spine backwards without pain. I associate this with a strong message that I can no longer "bend over backwards" to be accommodating.

Taking something (spoken) back means to change one's mind, to reconsider. Re-evaluating one's basic premises and casting off outmoded beliefs and behavior patterns are quintessential to personal transformation. To back down is to withdraw from a position, opinion or commitment. There were many levels of backing down required of me as I gained deeper insight into the mistaken ideas and self-punishing stance that had led to the breakdown in my health.

Something is backbreaking when it demands great exertion or is too arduous. (As I've mentioned, before my spine injury, I'd been living my life at a backbreaking pace.) If something backfires, it produces an unexpected and unwanted effect. (As I was to eventually discover, a lot of my unchallenged assumptions were creating situations which inadvertently backfired on me, leaving me disappointed and disillusioned.) Something backstage or backdoor is behind the scenes, secret, clandestine. Backtalk, according to my dictionary, is an insolent, impudent retort. I would add that what is backtalk to an authority figure (or to a dominant aspect of the psyche) is standing up for oneself from the underdog's point of view.

To have backing is to receive approval and endorsement, while backlash is a hostile, antagonistic reaction to something. I needed to give myself more of the former; my spine pain was supplying plenty of the latter. Early in my convalescence, I realized that some of the messages encoded in my "broken" back were that I needed backup from myself as well as support from others; and I needed to get people "off my back." I became aware that I had been both physically and psychologically carrying too much weight (not in terms of what I weigh -- I have always been fairly slender -- but in the literal sense of hauling heavy things around with my body, and in the emotional sense of taking on more than I could safely carry of other people's psychological demands on me).

Then there was the ogre on my back most of the time -- the inner critic that was always on my case for not doing things well enough or not being sufficient. It rode me relentlessly, always dissatisfied with me, always pushing me too hard and forcing me to live up to its specifications, no matter what the cost. I was a workaholic who expected perfection of myself in everything. My howling spine forced me to stop compounding the pain of living by asking too much of myself. I had spent my life.