

Kali Ma & Kundalini: Serpent Goddess Rising

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Abstract: Kundalini yoga is a relatively new practice to appear on the Western yoga scene. In this essay, I examine the place of Kali – or more accurately Her absence – in the transmission to the West from India. Accredited with its appropriation to the West is Yogi Bajhan, a Sikh man from India who is said to have brought the traditional practice of kundalini to the United States in the 1960s. The historical roots of kundalini yoga as posited by scholars in the field of Hinduism and Tantra however, tell us that Kundalini is a serpent goddess coiled around the base *cakra* and this form of Sakti is the Great Goddess Kali Ma. Through various techniques the Goddess is woken from her dormant state and carried up through the various *cakras* to be united with her divine consort Siva, leading the practitioner into exalted and ecstatic supreme states of consciousness and heightened states of awareness. Popular kundalini yoga as taught by Yogi Bajhan – the form taught here in Saskatoon – is missing a very important piece of the practice; the Goddess. In what follows I will explore the missing Kundalini in kundalini yoga.

Keywords: Kundalini, Yoga, Tantra, Kali, Goddess Worship

*Awake, Mother! Awake! How long Thou hast been asleep
In the lotus of the Muladhara!
Fulfill Thy secret function, Mother:
Rise to the thousand-petalled lotus within the head,
Where mighty Siva has His dwelling;
Swiftly pierce the six lotuses
And take away my grief, O Essence of Consciousness!¹*

¹ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 182 in Elizabeth Harding, *Kali The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* (Maine: Nicolas-Hays, 1998), 87.

Goddess Studies, historically speaking, is emerging as an academic discipline, it is quite evident that worship of a Divine Feminine most certainly is not. Diverse female divinities, descended from multitudes of pantheons reaching deep into prehistory have been – and continue to be – actively worshipped. Likewise, goddess worship is not a practice segregated to any single region of the globe, nor to any one specific religion; goddesses are as rich and diverse as the cultures that gave rise to them. That said, there is no denying that India has promulgated an inexhaustibly awe-inspiring pantheon of both gods and goddesses. India has over a vast expanse of time produced some of the most incredible mythologies and amassed a compendium of texts that impart (among other things) narratives vis-à-vis hosts of deities, *devas*, *asuras*, demons, and so forth. Such rich and lively discourses alongside India's pedigree of transformational yogic practices have proved both intriguing and appealing to the Western mind. There no doubt exist dialectics concerning both constructive and undesirable implications that such Western appropriation and inquisitiveness encompasses. The confines of this essay will limit such discourse apropos Kundalini yoga and the Goddess, Kali.

Yoga in the West has become primarily a mainstream phenomenon largely associated with fashion, physical appearance, exercise, healthy living, and all-around “trendiness.” I would argue that this Westernized appropriation entirely neglects the fundamental principles of traditional and ancient yogic practices and that Kundalini yoga is no different in this regard. As will be discussed in the proceeding pages, Kundalini yoga is a distinct form of yoga. Traditionally speaking, Kundalini is a manifestation of Kali who is “the mystical indweller in every human body.”² Practitioners stimulate and arouse the Kundalini energy guiding Her upward through various spiritual energy centers located in the subtle body called *cakras* which run from cranium to perineum. The goal of the

² Harding, *Kali*, 81 “In the heart chakra, she is called Hamsa, and in the chakra between the eyebrows, she is called Bindu. Once she reaches the Sahasrara chakra at the crown of the head, she becomes formless, transcendental consciousness.”

practice is to awaken Sakti³ and transcend temporal boundaries reaching ultimate states of consciousness. This is attained through various techniques viz. visualization, meditation, and breathing exercises; sometimes sexual practices are incorporated.⁴ The Kundalini energy is Sakti manifest as Kali in the form of a dormant serpent coiled around the base (Muladhara) *cakra*.⁵ Here she rests, awaiting resurrection. Activating the Kundalini is initiating an internal process whereby the innate primal energy coiled around the spine rises in a linear fashion up through each lotus center and joins in sacred communion with the Divine.

Eastern philosophies involving *cakras* and their manipulation are not new to the West. To be sure, the fetishization and romanticization of Eastern practices is a centuries old practice rooted in colonialism and imperial thinking. The prevalence of Reiki practitioners, classes, and New Age shops full of culturally appropriated and integrated knick-knacks attest to this.⁶ However, Kundalini is a much more recent phenomenon to reach western audiences than ideas of yoga, transcendental meditative practices, and *cakra* manipulation. Yoga classes and studios are a dime a dozen across North America but the inception of kundalini yoga is still in a preliminary phase. Evidence of this is found in the fact that of all the yoga classes offered on any given day in the western Canadian city of Saskatoon, where I resided at the time of this research (population, approximately 250,000), there is but one kundalini

³ Sakti, in Hinduism is the Divine Female, is energy, power and Ultimate Consciousness. She is the giver of Power to the Divine Masculine. Without Sakti, the God is essentially powerless.

⁴ For an interesting read re sexual practices see, David Gordon White, "Transformations in the Art of Love: Kamakala Practices in Hindu Tantric and Kaula Traditions," *History of Religions*, 38 no, 2 (1998): 179-82.

⁵ The *cakras* (identified with lotuses located within the subtle body) are (1) Muladhara – located at the base of the spine (2) Svadhishthana – located in the genitals (3) Manipura – the navel (4) Anahata – the heart (5) Vishuddha –throat (6) Ajna – 'third eye' or point between the eyebrows (7) Sahasrara – crown of the head.

⁶ Reiki has its origins in Japan; created by a Buddhist monk Dr. Mikao Usui (1865-1926). Reiki was brought to the West (Hawaii, United States) in 1937. See Shelly M. Nixon "Reiki in the United States," Academia.edu.

class taught each week.⁷ Moreover, the class instructor, herself a novice practitioner, has had no formal training in the practice of kundalini and the class contained no correlation to (or mention of) any form of Divine Feminine Energy, Sakti, Kali, or reference to Kundalini as any of the aforesaid.⁸ The reality that the most important aspect of Kundalini yoga – Sakti – was missing from the only class being offered in Saskatoon is somewhat disconcerting. Is the practice being white-washed and reconfigured to fit a more Western audience? Or is it merely an oversight on the part of presumptuous Western yoga fanatics grabbing hold of the “next hottest trend” in yoga? If so, are there potential consequences of putting this type of energy manipulation into the hands of improperly guided and unprepared audiences?

There are those who believe that this practice is an extremely powerful form of energy manipulation and left in the hands of unqualified teachers can arouse certain aspects that can have severe, even detrimental, side effects. Danielle LaPorte quotes Sadhguru as saying: “Trying to activate the Kundalini because you read a book somewhere is like starting to build a nuclear reactor in your home because you read how to do on the internet.”⁹ Furthermore, Ajit

⁷ Locating the single Kundalini class in Saskatoon was a bit of a hunt. It is not overtly advertised, in fact, an online search led me to someone listed but it turned out they were in Calgary. They, in turn, directed me to the one person in Saskatoon that was offering a Kundalini class. The class is held once a week and has a very small following (there were only two of us – including myself when I went). The class was delivered in a very generic, ‘one-size-fits-all’ fashion that neglected to mention any form of the Goddess or Shakti. The class was one hour of Kundalini followed up with a half hour of yoga Nidra (sleeping yoga). The Kundalini part of the class consisted of the instructor sitting on an elevated platform reading aloud from sheets she had printed off containing guided instructions; for the second part, the instructor left the room. During the class the instructor did identify as being new to the practice herself, only having been doing this kind (i.e., kundalini) of yoga for a few months. The class had only begun to be offered in March 2018.

⁸ Following up with an internet search for this essay I came across a Facebook page for this class/group of local practitioners. Again, there is no mention of any connection or correlation to the core teachings of the practice nor the Goddess/Shakti/Kali.

⁹ Danielle LaPorte, *White Hot Truth* (Vancouver: Virtuonica, 2017), 170. Yet books promoting Yogi Bajhan’s Kundalini, as such, mention no word of caution at all and emphasize the physical benefits associated with the practice such as

Mookerjee shares a case study performed by Dr. Sannella (an American researcher) that indicates the sensitive nature of this type of energy manipulation.¹⁰ A forty-eight-year-old woman who had begun practicing transcendental meditation for a few years began experiencing occasional tingling and surges of heat, she was awake for days on end, she began having cramping of the legs and eventually her big toe nail darkened and partially separated from the flesh of the nail bed.¹¹ Beyond the physical effects she felt there were visual and auditory sensory experiences as well.¹² Regardless of what one believes is possible the example is a case in point of the varying degrees of effects people lay claim to. Ajit Mookerjee prompts awareness of two important facts she urges to be kept in mind while further research and investigation into the practice of Kundalini yoga continue: “One is that panic is only experienced by those individuals who are unfamiliar with meditation techniques, and who therefore have no way of understanding or of controlling these symptoms themselves. The other is that meditation itself is no chance response to a chance stimulus. It is a systematic and *willed* modulation of consciousness that puts the body into harmony with itself and the macrocosm. The importance of this initiating element is clear in all ancient texts on Kundalini and cannot be overstressed.”¹³ She further points out that there is a growing number of people in the West who upon experiencing Kundalini turn to medical, psychiatric, parapsychological and new-age healing facilities for help; however these practices are not equipped with the necessary experience, knowledge, or skills in the handling of Kundalini.¹⁴ Regardless of the potential of danger that may or may not be faced with the practice, one consensus seems to be prominent in the research: the serpent goddess Kundalini, embodying Sakti, identified as Kali, is – or ought to be – the apex of the practice. In

good digestion, lessening signs of aging and handling the stresses of our fast-paced society.

¹⁰ Ajit Mookerjee, *Kundalini The Arousal of the Inner Energy* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1986).

¹¹ Mookerjee, *Kundalini*, 92.

¹² Mookerjee, *Kundalini*, 93.

¹³ Mookerjee, *Kundalini*, 93.

¹⁴ Mookerjee, *Kundalini*, 94.

its transmission to the West the powerful (and necessary) place of the goddess in Kundalini yoga appears to have been lost. Kundalini, it would seem, has become just another form of trending yoga; the archetypal principles fundamentally inherent to its purpose are missing.¹⁵

Kali

Kali is the Mistress of Time, the cause of worldly change, and as such, she consumes all things. All beings and all things must yield to her in the end – our desires and hopes, our family, romantic ties, our friends, possessions and hard-earned success in business. As the eternal, indifferent Time she confronts man [sic] with his pitiful finite attachments, swallows them up, and produces them again in a different form, in a different time.¹⁶

The Goddess Kali is a fascinating subject of inquiry, especially working within a Western framework. She is unlike almost anything ‘Western culture’ would perceive as Divine: her destructive and almost ‘demon-like’ qualities would generally befit

¹⁵ Granted, the research I managed to conduct for this project may not fully support this thesis in its wider context; nor, perhaps, as such a generalization of the “West” as it pertains to a greater whole. Perhaps this applies only to the more localized scene in Saskatoon. However, I think it is worth noting that this has been a subject of personal interest to me for some time now and I have read many of the ‘popular’ books available; I have also looked at some of the websites for the “official Kundalini as taught by Yogi Bajhan” training that happens in Mexico and Indonesia every year. Of all the reading and personal research that I have done, it was not until I started the academic research for this paper that any connection was made between the goddess Kali and Kundalini. Hence were born the conclusions I have drawn herein. Furthermore, I have a friend who was born in India and has practiced Kundalini for the past thirty years; regrettably, due to (1) the time constraints of this research and scheduling and (2) being unable to fulfill the requirements for the human research ethics committee in time, I was unable to interview him in a more formal manner; nor was I able to interview a Kali devotee and local yoga studio owner (not the same studio where the single Kundalini class is offered) who was so graciously willing to accommodate my request of being interviewed. Perhaps further development of this work will allow for such endeavors to come to fruition.

¹⁶ Harding, *Kali*, 59.

a horror film more than a Divine Mother. This conjecture, however, would be most inaccurate. Maha Kali (or Kali Ma)¹⁷ is a powerful, fierce, divine, independent goddess¹⁸ who is venerated and respected deeply by Hindus all over the world.¹⁹ Where does this beneficent goddess come from? Early Sanskrit literature speaks of a demoness Long-Tongue (*Dīrghajihvī*) of the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* who has been identified as a sort of proto-Kali.²⁰ Long-Tongue uses her endowments to lick up Vedic “ritual juice” and has a body covered in “mice” (vaginas).²¹ The god Indra endows a Sumitra with penises on every limb in order to lock the demoness in so that Indra can slay her.²² The tongue in this myth illicitly licks up sacrificial offerings that belong to the gods and seems to be connected to a symbolic message of overt female sexual aggression.²³ This sacrificial theme again appears in the *Mundaka Upanisad* (c.a. sixth-century BCE) as well it is when the name Kali is first formally introduced.²⁴ This reference is not to the Goddess but to one of the seven tongue-like flames of the sacrificial fire and, therefore, for any direct reference to the Goddess herself one must turn to the Indian Epic the *Mahābhārata*. Here is where a “dark goddess named Kali appears in the dreams of the Pandava warriors to warn them of their own imminent deaths.”²⁵ At this time in history, the prevalent versions of this goddess were still on the fringes of Indian society: she was conceived of as a threat to sacrificial offerings, a challenger

¹⁷ Maha is a Sanskrit word that translates to English as “great“ and is often placed in front of words, especially in relation to goddesses e.g., Maha Devi.

¹⁸ While it is true that she is the consort – sometimes wife – of Siva, she is independent in the sense she is never portrayed in a submissive manner to him; in fact, it is quite the opposite. Siva may be her lover or husband but she is independent in her demeanor and in her portrayals and iconography.

¹⁹ Her worship has even extended to the popular culture of Instagram feeds and popularly available books like Sally Kempton, *Awakening Shakti* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True Inc., 2013).

²⁰ Jeffrey Kripal, *Kali’s Child* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 247.

²¹ Kripal, *Kali’s Child*, 247.

²² *Kali’s Child*, 247.

²³ *Kali’s Child*, 248.

²⁴ *Kali’s Child*, 248.

²⁵ *Kali’s Child*, 248.

of the Vedic gods, and as a savior to the Pandava brothers. It is in the *Devi-mahatmya* that she is brought closer into Hindu society.²⁶

The *Devi-mahatmya* offers a full account of the goddesses' appearance in Hindu mythology. In classic Indian style the action-packed tale is full of demons and gods in cosmic battle. Durga is fighting against the demons Suymha and Nisumbha and their demon army. The gods have been subdued by demons and subsequently called on the all-powerful Durga to save them. Durga offers the gods solace and comes to their aid. She calms them as she heads into battle with the first of the demons attacking Canda and Munda. They are no match for the ferocious Divine Warrior though and her fury springs forth Kali from her brow. Kali, thirsty for victory flings demons into her gaping mouth, crushing her foe in her jaws. This cosmic battle has nearly been won and the demon army nearly defeated except for Raktabija. Incessantly he reproduces with each drop of his blood spilled. Durga, realizing she is only making the situation worse with the multiple blows she inflicts calls on Kali who, "swallows the blood-born creatures."²⁷ Kali's trademark tongue designed specifically to lick up the blood of Raktabija ceases the promulgation of the demon, reestablishing the balance of the cosmos. Given this account, it is not hard to imagine that she is generally portrayed in grotesque depictions. A fair estimate would account for these images to be quite startling, especially to a Western audience; however, the symbolism that lies at the heart of her iconography contains profound spiritual meaning.²⁸

Images of Kali are often shocking and profane. The goddess is generally depicted as wild and ravenous, dancing on the body of her submissive consort Siva. She holds the severed head of a slain demon in one of her four hands while her lolling tongue, thirsting

²⁶ *Kali's Child*, 248.

²⁷ David Kinsley, "Freedom from Death in the Worship of Kali," *Numen* 22, Fasc. 3 (1975): 187

²⁸ For discussion on a cultural debate regarding Kali's tongue see: Jeffrey Kripal, *Kali's Child* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Kripal provides an insightful discussion on the reversed meaning of Kali's tongue in modern-day Bengal. He says that her tongue is not sticking out to lick up the blood of slain demons but rather as a sign of shame, indicative of Bengali's rejecting their Tantric history (245). He provides great detail on the functions Kali's tongue has served throughout history.

for blood, protrudes from her mouth. Her long black hair is disheveled and strewn about and her skin is usually a dark shade of blue. She is all but naked save for a girdle of severed human arms around her waist. What is more, she is adorned with a necklace of fifty human heads and infants for earrings.



[Figure 1] “Iconic painting of Goddess Kali with one foot perched on unconscious Siva, Holding Darkia’s head.” Anant Shivaji Desai [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Such an image can no doubt be shocking, especially to those unfamiliar with the Goddess and the significance embodied within the iconography. Lina Gupta offers this delineation of the symbolism encompassed in the images associated with Kali:

The human skull in her hand is the seat of the ultimate knowledge that finally leads one from bondage to liberation. With her upper left hand depicted as holding a sword of wisdom, she severs the bonds of illusion and mistaken identity that are holding her devotees in bondage. She is naked because she is beyond the shackles of Maya or

illusion. The fifty human heads of her necklace refer to the fifty letters of the Sanskrit language. The fifty letters are used for humans and mantras; they are Brahman itself in the form of sound energy. Her girdle of human arms with folded palms suggests how to perform action without any attachment in order to avoid further entrenchment in the bondage of the cycle of cause and effect (the law of Karma). Her heavy hips and *yoni* (sexual organs) stand for the creative process. Her three eyes represent energy radiated in three directions: as moon, sun, and fire. The well-developed breasts...sustain the created world...²⁹

In addition: “Kali’s tongue became the power of yogic will to eat up desires and thoughts so that the luminosity of our essential awareness can reveal itself.”³⁰

Although Kali did not always enjoy the high status she now does she became the most popularly worshipped goddess in the Tantric traditions of Hinduism.³¹ This is especially true of Calcutta, Bengal where numerous temples are dedicated to her.³² Kali is associated with cremation grounds, tantric rites, and is appeased with offerings of blood, alcohol and other such substances which are generally deemed ‘unclean’ or ‘impure’ in mainstream Hindu ritual practices.³³ Some Tantric traditions, however, utilize forbidden and

²⁹ Lina Gupta, “Kali, The Savior,” in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooney et.al. (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 23. The symbolism of dancing on Siva has various myths associated with it. See also, David Kinsley, “Freedom from Death in the Worship of Kali,” *Numen* 22, no. 3 (1975): 183-207.

³⁰ Sally Kempton, *Awakening Shakti* (Boulder CO: Sounds True Inc., 2013), 118

³¹ See, David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

³² Bengal has a rich history of yogic and tantric practices and is commonly known to revere Kali to a high degree. For more information on Bengali cults see, June McDaniel, “The Role of Yoga in Some Bengali Bhakti Traditions: Shaktism, Gaudiya Vaisnavism, Baul, and Sahajiya Dharma,” *Journal of Hindu Studies* 5 (2012): 53-74. Etymologically the goddess Kali is connected to the name of Calcutta.

³³ The Five M’s consist of *Mudra*, *Mansa*, *Maysya*, *Madira*, and *Maithuna*, substances generally forbidden and deemed unclean in traditional Hinduism. In Vama Sakti Tantra (left-handed tantra) these are used literally and in Dakshina Sakti Tantra (right-handed tantra) they are used symbolically. For more

impure substances (and acts) as tools to transmute earthly dualities.³⁴ The Sanskrit word for *tantra* can refer to a text or a system of ritual instructions; however in its more specific sense it “indicates a body of soteriological knowledge, ritual and praxis regarded as distinct from, and more powerful than, Vedic revelation.”³⁵ The Sanskrit root, *tan*, means to expand; thus, Tantra indicates an all-encompassing knowledge.³⁶ Tantra involves an emptying of the Self whereby its ancient wisdom imparts eternal truths to the sincere seeker. The practice often involves complex visualizations and ritual consumption of forbidden substances: using ‘vulgar’ devices tantrikas to gain the ability to transcend the limits of this world, overcome revulsions associated with the perversions perceived in these impure acts and substances, and access a connection to the cosmos only attainable through Tantric rites. This is admittedly a gross oversimplification of Tantra and although the following pages will delve into the tradition somewhat more deeply, to a greater extent this is a subject of inquiry that must be left for elsewhere.³⁷

At the very least a rudimentary understanding of Indic yogic roots needs to be established. The standard dictionary definition of the word yoga is thus: “a Hindu system of philosophy aiming at the mystical union of the [S]elf [Atman] with the Supreme Being [Brahman] in a state of complete awareness and tranquility through

information see David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 253-263.

³⁴ See: Christian K. Wedermeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art: Its Philosophy & Physics* (New Delhi: Kumar, 1966).

³⁵ James Mallinson, and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2017), 28.

³⁶ Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art: its Philosophy & Physics* (New Delhi: Kumar, 1966), 19.

³⁷ Christian K. Wedermeyer, *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art: Its Philosophy & Physics* (New Delhi: Kumar, 1966).

certain physical and mental exercises ... (C19: from Sanskrit: a yoking, union, from *yunakti* he yokes).”³⁸ This word, largely misunderstood, misappropriated, and bearing deviated connotations, in the West is more-often-than-not identified with fashion (e.g., Lululemon); physical benefits associated with stretching and strength postures; a certain physique (often long and lean); ‘spirituality’ (which is arguably quite often superficial at best). Trending practices like ‘hot yoga’ have even crept their way onto the scene. Yoga is, however, so much more than these skewed ideals which are merely mutilated forms of sacred ancient wisdoms. Scholar of religion Huston Smith postulates: “Whereas the West has sought strength and beauty, India has been interested in precision and control, ideally complete control over the body’s every function...extensive instructions on the subject comprise an authentic yoga, *hatha yoga*. Originally it was practiced as preliminary to spiritual yoga, but it has largely lost this connection.”³⁹ The first reference to *hatha yoga* appeared in textual sources around the end of the first millennium CE. These were methods drawn from Patanjali and tantric yoga but also included physical methods found in neither of the forementioned.⁴⁰ Over the past one hundred fifty years modern yoga has been developing in new and interesting ways both in and outside of India.⁴¹ Traditional forms of yoga, especially *hatha yoga*, have undergone sometimes radical changes (one must only think of “hot yoga” to understand this assertion). My research identifies that *kundalini yoga* and *hatha yoga* envelop a deep homology which raises curiosity: given the prominence of *hatha yoga* already firmly established in the West why is *kundalini yoga* only just now gaining traction?⁴² This is yet

³⁸ *Collins English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “yoga“

³⁹ Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 127.

⁴⁰ Mallinson, and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*.

⁴¹ *Roots of Yoga*.

⁴² “...the practice of *hatha yoga* gives the practitioner control of bodily actions and allows him to raise sperm up along the spine, into a center in the head (*usnisa cakra*) where its movement is stilled. Transforming the liquid involves stillness, when it can thicken into spontaneous love (*prema*) and become a unity of blissful emotion (*samarasa*) which is immune to distraction. One can then ‘drink the nectar from the moon’ and the transformation of poison into nectar represents the transformation of lust into love. Such yogic practice is often

again another area deserving of discussion elsewhere. For now, it is sufficient to recognize there exists a disconnect.

The hands of yoga in its purest original form reach back in time thousands of years and deliver a rich and pointed history. The earliest evidence of yoga can be found in artifacts excavated from the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro – the Indus Valley.⁴³ There the proto-Siva (Pasupati) seal was unearthed. This seal is arguably direct evidence of ancient yogic roots. The seal depicts an image of what is now called proto-Siva sitting in a yogic posture in a state of deep meditation.⁴⁴ Texts and artifacts that date from this period are successive. They lead to a particularly sacred Hindu text – one that delineates three prominent forms of yoga: *jnana*, *bhakti*, and *karma*⁴⁵ – *The Bhagavad Gita*.⁴⁶ Bhakti yoga I suggest has the

described by metaphors, such as ‘diving deep without getting wet’ and ‘making the frog dance before the serpent.’“ McDaniel, “The Role of Yoga,” 69

⁴³ Mohenjo Daro and Harappa are two important cities in Indian history. Considered a pre-Vedic developmental phase, circa 2500 -1500 BCE (although some argue it may date as far back as 3500) it provides great archeological evidence that indicates great importance and worship of a feminine Divine (Great Mother) as yogic and meditational practices. Discovered accidentally in 1856 while a railway company was looking for cheap supplies, Sir. John Marshall and Dr. Sahana began significant excavation in 1921, uncovering many important seals alongside many other significant findings such as the Great Bath. There is plenty of easily accessible and worthy material on this subject if one should be so inclined to further research it. This is a contested opinion, however. See for example *Roots of Yoga*

⁴⁴ Here also it should be noted that there is evidence of goddess worship as well; in fact, the Harappa left indications that it may have been a matriarchal society. Furthermore, Siva is the epitome of a true yogi.

⁴⁵ There are sometimes considered four: *raja*, *jnana*, *karma*, *bhakti*.

⁴⁶ An excerpt of the longer epic Mahabharata, the *Bhagavad Gita* (translated as Song of the Lord) is arguably the most revered text among Hindus and has impacted some of the great thinkers of our time (e.g., Henry David Thoreau). The Gita is essentially a dialogue shared between Krisna (an avatar of Visnu) and Arjuna who is a warrior and his duty (*dharma*) is to fight a righteous battle. Arjuna endures a personal crisis and thus the scene is set for Krisna to show his true glory and might to Arjuna and he expounds the truth of *dharma* and yoga. There are no two humans with the exact same makeup or dispositions or demeanors, and as such there is no one path to salvation. Rather, there are various yogas for the various dispositions encompassed in humankind. Also,

closest affinity to the subject matter at hand. Bhakti yoga is a form of devotional yoga that developed circa 500-1500 BCE and involves viz. visualization, meditation, transformative identity, worship (*puja*), adoration, devotion or love (*bhajan*), service (*seva*), and sacrifice (*yajna*). Bhakti yoga became the prominent form of yoga in Kali Tantra (especially in Bengal).⁴⁷

Tantra – like yoga – has developed some warped connotations in the West. David Kinsley delivers this wonderful and concise description of Tantra:

Tantrism generally is ritually oriented. By means of various rituals (exterior and interior, bodily and mental) the *sadhaka* (practitioner) seeks to gain *moksa* (release, salvation). A consistent theme in this endeavor is the uniting of opposites (male-female, microcosm-macrocosm, sacred-profane, Siva-Sakti). In Tantrism, there is an elaborate, subtle geography of the body that must be learned, controlled, and ultimately resolved in unity. By means of the body – both the physical and the subtle bodies – the *sadhaka* may manipulate various levels of reality and harness the dynamics of those levels to the attainment of his goal.⁴⁸

Generally, Western culture's appropriation of Tantra associates it solely with sexual practices. Most likely the first thing that comes to mind is the *Kama Sutra*, thereby delivering connotations that have been developed through grave misunderstandings – and one could even argue perversions – of the core teachings. There has been a gross commodification of this sacred ancient rite and ignorance often leads people to assume Tantra is a platform for practitioners to indulge in hedonistic self-gratification. A simple Google search automatically supplies a superfluous inundation of how-to tutorials on Tantric sex which are erroneously digested by the masses. This appropriated idea of Tantra does not merely superimpose but rather

Patanjali's yogas are of great import but take us far beyond the scope of this essay.

⁴⁷ This period also produced many poet-saints like Ramprasad Sen who dedicated many devotional poems to Kali wherein he positioned Her as Mother.

⁴⁸ David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (London: University of California Press, 1975), 111.

impinges on the deep spiritual principles embedded in the teachings: “Tantra has been exaggerated and, ultimately, commercialized – celebrated as the sexiest, most tantalizing offering of the exotic Orient [*sic*].”⁴⁹ Perhaps this is the reason there seems to be a conscious effort on the part of Yogi Bajhan’s (who will be discussed below) version of kundalini yoga to separate it from Tantra, or at the very least carefully to delineate the role of tantrism. By excluding commercialized and sexual interpretations of Tantra in his approach there may be an attempt to maintain sanctity in the image of kundalini yoga; to ameliorate it. This is merely a postulation, however. Regardless, the use of mudras and mantras are promoted and used in kundalini yoga as taught by Yogi Bajhan and these are, by their very nature Tantric.

Kundalini

A Tantric yogi sees the great Mother present within his [*sic*] human body as the Kundalini. She lies hidden by her self-created ignorance, like a snake, coiled and fast asleep in the Muladhara chakra at the bottom of the spinal cord. Through sadhana, the Tantric awakens the Mother and rouses her to go upward. Flashing like a phosphorescent flame through the Sushumna channel, she pierces the various chakras until she reaches the highest plane and unites with Shiva at the crown of the head.⁵⁰

The household name associated with kundalini yoga in the West is Yogi Bajhan.⁵¹ This version of Kundalini has been deemed

⁴⁹ Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (London: University of California Press, 2003), 10. This book is a wonderful resource worthy of reading for anyone interested in the subject. It is a wealth of knowledge.

⁵⁰ Harding, *Kali*, 70-1.

⁵¹ Yogi Bajhan founded the 3HO organization (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) in the United States in the 1960s. He is recognized as a pioneer and entrepreneur. This paper does not seek to take any stance on his personal character but rather only to look at the paradigm shift in the original teachings of Kundalini yoga juxtaposed the one Yogi Bajhan inserted in the West. I think it is

as the “authentic” kundalini brought intact from India. For many who would not know the difference, it would be easy to accept this at face value; however, given a bit of insight into the traditions highlighted above it becomes somewhat sketchy to accept this form as an authoritative one. Several factors lead to this conclusion. For starters, on a superficial level even, practitioners who follow Yogi Bajhan’s kundalini traditionally wear turbans (apparently to keep the energy from escaping from the crown *cakra*); this, I suggest, leads to the assumption that Kundalini is a Sikh born tradition – which it is not.⁵² Yogi Bhajan speaks of three types of Tantra: black, red and white. He says: “White tantric is to purify and uplift the being. Black tantric is for mental control of other people. Red tantric is for sexual energy and senses.”⁵³ Granted, I am unable to say with certainty if this is the case in all the literature on Tantra, I can say that in the research conducted for this essay this passage is the only one that alludes to this categorization of Tantras outside of the two established traditions of “right-handed” and “left-handed.”⁵⁴ I suggest this is evidence in support of my earlier claim regarding the caution taken in the classification of kundalini as a form of Tantra; for in this context, kundalini is categorized as White Tantra.

Devotion to and worship of the Divine Mother – Kali – exists in seeing Kundalini as the Divine Mother lying dormant at the base of the spine. When she is woken up She reveals her great power in the body. The worshiper's body becomes likened to a temple with their breath guiding the Goddess up through the *cakras*; the breath slows into hieratic rhythms where it becomes *kriya* – the inner fire rite.⁵⁵ The rhetoric surrounding *kriya* as part of the kundalini practice in both the pop-culture literature and the local yoga class

also important to note the era in which this transmission took place; the 1960s in the United States were a time of great investigations into self-liberation and produced some very interesting figures (e.g. Ram Dass).

⁵² Yogi Bajhan was a Sikh and the first woman to do an understudy with him, Shakti Parwah Kaur Khalsa is an ordained minister of the Sikh Dharma.

⁵³ Shakti Parwha Kaur, *Kundalini Yoga The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group 1998), 179.

⁵⁴ The *gunas* – sacred threads linked to the yogas – in Hinduism are identified by these colors and perhaps this is an attempt to synchronize the *gunas* with the tantras.

⁵⁵ Thomas Matus, “Dharma, Yoga, Tantra,” *Substance Use & Misuse*, 48, no. 12 (2013): 1180-1186.

pigeonhole it is as a form of breath exercise. This is true of the practice in a general sense yet it is not reflective of the totality. *Kriya* yoga is “usually understood to mean “yoga as practice” or “practical yoga,” ...[it is] also associated with the vocabulary of initiation and sacrifice, and is of importance within schools of *tantra*...”⁵⁶ This inner fire (*kriya*) was called dragon breath in the class; participants were guided to execute short, fast-paced breaths through the nose that are drawn up from the belly. This breath is meant to stimulate the Kundalini energy in the Muladhara *cakra*. This type of breathing physically heats the body up which is likely where the “inner fire rite” gets its name from.⁵⁷ This “dragon breath” is the pinnacle of the practice for it is this breath that is said to arouse the Kundalini energy drawing it upward; the Kundalini practitioner begins to awaken this Sakti, raising the female divine energy upwards through the various chakras bringing her to the highest level where she is said to join with Siva. The reason for this breath was not given in the class and in the popular Western (i.e. Yogi Bajan) literature it is not openly explained: the purpose is to awaken Kali within. The recurring theme here is the missing Kali. To be sure, when analyzing academic discourse regarding the traditional practices of Kali Tantra and Kundalini yoga, there is a major disconnect. In juxtaposition to the form of kundalini yoga which is taught in Saskatoon and promoted in popular literature and social media sites like Facebook,⁵⁸ Kundalini as the Goddess Kali is clearly missing.

⁵⁶ Matus, “Dharma, Yoga, Tantra.”

⁵⁷ In some Tibetan-Buddhist Tantric practices, there are similar types of breathing exercises that physically heat the body up to the point of withstanding freezing cold water. It is truly an interesting subject of inquiry.

⁵⁸ Since working on this paper there has been an advertisement for the website Gaia showing up on my Facebook feed promoting their online Kundalini class. Given my interests, I no doubt wanted to see what this was all about. Here again, there was no mention of Divine Feminine or Sakti and certainly not Kali. We seem to be so caught up in the idea of energy manipulation yet are neglecting to define the very important point that it is Divine Female Energy, a form of goddess worship and more specifically the worship of the Divine Mother Kali that lies dormant in us. https://gaia.com/lp/kundalini-yoga?fbclid=IwAR2Tcg_SR_7rKL85jUsMKuF70YTSaFvPTDs8XK2X1BCHIJKGKISnV9NFfdE