

Energy Rising

Three Kundalini meditation teachers share techniques for tapping into the flow of energy within you—and moving toward spiritual awakening.

By Kathy Wyer

That calm feeling that I get from asana practice made me fall in love with yoga, and it was in my hatha practice that I first discovered how the breath can channel energy through the body. But I didn't immediately find the same benefits in meditation. Distracted by the natural impulse of my mind to jump about and wander, I rarely dipped into deep calm while meditating. That is, until one day when, trying to meditate, I had an 'aha!' moment: As I struggled to release my thoughts and focus on the flow, I suddenly realized that Kundalini (the flow of energy itself) was *palpable*. It felt like a swirl of energy within my body; I could focus on it and follow the flow, and the best part was that as I did so, my mind moved from a state of agitation to calm.

This was the first time I went beyond the concept of 'feeling into the flow' and had an actual experience of that flow. I'm not sure how it happened, but once it did, I saw how intense this energy could be and began to identify it more readily in my practice. And my firsthand taste of this flow made me realize that for hatha yogis who have experienced energy moving through the body, Kundalini meditation may be the most accessible form of meditation there is.

Fundamentals of Kundalini

The word *kundalini* refers to the energy that resides at the base of the spine and that, once awakened, rises up the spine and leads to spiritual awakening. By focusing on the feeling that the breath creates on the inhalation and exhalation, you naturally develop a greater awareness of the flow of energy within and between your body's energy centers, known as chakras. As your sensitivity to that inner flow expands, an understanding of our true nature—which yogic masters refer to as the Self—will emerge within you. Enlightened yogis maintain that there is nothing apart from the Self; it is everywhere, in everyone and everything.

Kundalini is carried from the base of the spine throughout the body by way of three primary *nadis*, or channels. These are the *shushumna*, which runs alongside and parallel to the spinal cord, and the *ida* and the *pingala*, which weave back and forth along the spine.

The points where these channels intersect make up the seven major chakras: The first is muladhara, the root chakra located at the base of the spine. Svadisthana, the second chakra, representing sex, is at the genitals. Manipura, the third chakra, is located two fingers below the navel. At the heart center, you'll find the fourth chakra, anahata, and at the throat you'll find the fifth, called visuddha. Between the eyes is the sixth chakra, known as ajna, or third eye. And finally, the sahasrara, or crown chakra, is located at the top of the head. Once you get a sense of the seven points, then you can start to connect them and feel a more continuous flow of energy moving through you.

3 Teachers, 3 Approaches

There is more than one way to experience Kundalini meditation. I learned this last year, when I attended a workshop with three of the West's most accomplished teachers of Kundalini meditation, Swami Shankarananda, Swami Chetanananda, and Swami Vivekananda (also known as Master Charles Cannon). The Three Gurus, as they are known, are members of a spiritual lineage descended from the

renowned Indian sage Bhagawan Nityananda. Longtime friends who've known each other since the 1970s, the three men took *sannyasa* (the vows of a swami) from the late Swami Muktananda. (Their tradition is distinct from the Kundalini Yoga that was brought to the West by Yogi Bhaajan, which is a Sikh tradition that teaches a hatha yoga practice.)

Once a year these American-born Kundalini masters join together in a weeklong program that culminates in a weekend meditation intensive. Their collaboration is highly unusual, given that each offers a unique pathway for understanding. Yet the experience enables participants to learn classical as well as contemporary techniques and to discover a practice to fit their own sensibility.

The Path of Self-inquiry

Swami Shankarananda, a native New Yorker living near Melbourne, Australia, is the spiritual director of the Shiva School of Meditation and Yoga. Considered to have the most classical approach, he relies on engagement in the Shiva Process of Self-Inquiry, an inner dialogue in which students ask precise questions of the Self to find the answers within. Bringing attention to each of four primary chakras—the navel, heart, throat, and third eye—the students ask themselves questions such as: Is what I'm feeling pleasant or unpleasant? Am I tense or relaxed? These inquiries focus awareness and open the chakras.

Another variation is breathing deeply into each of the chakras while repeating the mantra *Om namah shivaya*, which can be translated as, 'I turn to my own inner Self.' Shankarananda says, 'The first step in meditation is to concentrate the mind on one thought. The mantra is a single thought. With practice, the mind can become concentrated and move beyond thought to deep meditation.'

Grow with the Flow

Swami Chetanananda is the abbot of the Nityananda Institute in Portland, Oregon. He likens himself to a jazz musician who uses traditional techniques while also exploring creative riffs. He eschews inner dialogue and instead favors quieting the mind by focusing on the circulation of energy within the body by breathing into the heart area and between each of the seven major chakras.

Chetananda recognizes that the mind's chatter may never be completely silent. But by cultivating greater concentration on the breath and the flow of energy, he believes, the mind will eventually quiet down enough that thoughts will seem like low static in the background. He recommends that we bundle every thought, emotion, and desire into a deep wish to grow spiritually, then allow that wish to open and expand us. This process translates into a basic but powerful mantra repeated with ever-deepening feeling: 'I wish to grow.' Through practice, a palpable sense of energy intensifies, our hearts become more open, and a sense of total well-being arises. Practice is simple, he says: 'Bring your attention to the inner flow, and it will carry you over.'

Music for Meditators

Taking the most contemporary approach of the three, Master Charles Cannon, who heads the Synchronicity Foundation in Faber, Virginia, recommends the use of technology-enhanced music as a vehicle for meditation, which he also creates. Known as the Synchronicity Experience, Cannon's specially produced CDs are designed to 'meditate you,' purportedly by balancing your brainwaves and bringing you into a meditative mindset. The CDs use a method called Holodynamic Vibrational Entrainment Technology. Cannon suggests that students relax, breathe easily, and immerse themselves in the flow of inner energy while listening to this music. When asked the one thing students can do to bring about real change in their lives, he replies: 'Meditate. Meditate. Meditate.'

Kathy Wyer has practiced yoga for 20 years and has written about health for many publications.