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## **Kundalini and the Process of Individuation**

“You see, the **Kundalini** in psychological terms is that which makes you go on the greatest adventures. I say, ‘Oh, damn, why did I ever try such a thing?. But if I turn back, then the whole adventure goes out of my life, and my life is nothing any longer; it has lost its flavor.’ It is this quest that makes life livable, and this is **Kundalini**; this is the divine urge...” [1]

-- **Carl Gustav Jung**

**Kundalini** is the divine urge within us all that longs to connect the immanent to the transcendent, to unite the particular center of our inner universe with the infinity of the outer universe, to achieve union or ‘yoga’ between heaven and earth. Biblical language describes human beings as reflections of the divine, made in God’s image, each of us having a spark of the Godly within. The process can be described theologically or psychologically. **Kundalini** yoga is the classical scientific and spiritual system and language for describing and encouraging this process of awakening and will be discussed in this essay only in terms of its relation to other ways of understanding it. In addition to other religious and non-religious models, I will be specifically exploring Carl Gustav Jung’s notions of individuation and the unconscious to try to get a handle on what is **Kundalini** and what is our relationship to it.

Throughout and within different religious and spiritual traditions there are human beings who are considered to be saints, prophets, sages, masters, avatars, holy, or enlightened, and the traditions and the people honor them as having to some or to full extent realized their inner sanctity. They serve as models or teachers for us in our journeys toward deeper and higher realizations of our humanity. The world honors people of genius like Albert Einstein, master artists such as Picasso and Vincent Van Gough, and musicians like Bach, Beethoven, or Jimi Hendrix. And while some people may be uncomfortable with religious language used to describe humans, many of those same people might find themselves admitting to the revolutionary sanctity of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. We tend to see these people as stars that we can be in awe of but not really touch and yet we all have such infinite capacities. The process of getting in touch with that infinite capacity within and manifesting it without does not have to be as dramatic or as loud as with the folks mentioned above. It could, but it could also be experienced as a small still voice that only you can hear or through a personal hobby or private religious practice that you keep to yourself. To awaken ‘**Kundalini**’, which some scholars translate as meaning ‘latent reservoir of energy’, ‘power at rest’, ‘psycho-somatic power center’, ‘a form of psycho-spiritual energy’, or ‘the energy of consciousness’ is to tap into the root of what we really are. [2&3]

Ultimately we are all alone and we are all equal and all have our own way toward realization that is intimately connected to but not determined by our material or cultural circumstances. How do we wrestle with this subject without running back and forth, up and down, between heaven and earth, at least conceptually if not actually? Jung speaks of our own way toward realization and the awakening of **Kundalini** as the process of individuation. In *What Jung Really Said*, E.A. Bennet explains:

“Individuation, as a process, can be seen at important stages in life and at times of crisis when fate upsets the purpose and expectation of the ego-consciousness. Individuation implies a living relation between the conscious and the unconscious. This aim is inherent in life, an ideal reached through the process of blending personal and collective interests. These compliment one another to form a totality, the self...” [4]

Jung speaks of the true self as a holistic entity and not as a limited egoic island. Indeed, he defines individuation in terms of ego transcendence when he writes:

“But again and again I note that the individuation process is confused with the coming of the ego into consciousness and that the ego is in consequence identified with the self, which naturally produces a hopeless conceptual muddle. Individuation is then nothing but ego-centeredness and autoeroticism. But the self comprises infinitely more than a mere ego. It is as much one’s self, and all other selves, as the ego. Individuation does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to oneself...” (**The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, CW 8, p. 226**). [5]

This passage shows how the forces that an individuator has to come to terms with are much beyond the conscious realm and emphasizes that the world is realized within. Individuation seems to involve a turning inside out and at the same time a turning outside in. Significantly, Judaism uses the word *tshuvah*, meaning ‘to turn’ or ‘turning’ to describe the process of walking the spiritual path and moving toward religious transformation.

Individuation and the unconscious are like old friends who relate well with each other and who are known by many different names. The path toward enlightenment and union with the One Mind could be a Buddhist way of understanding individuation and its relationship to the unconscious. The path of Exodus from the ego-state of Egypt to the holistic state of the Land of Milk and Honey is another way. The point is that the process of individuation seems to involve a level of ego-transcendence and an opening up into the relationship with the unconscious aspects of your whole self. While there is an expansion of self-consciousness meeting or confronting the unconscious, there is also a centering and eccentric tendency involved that seems paradoxical. A healthy relationship to and understanding of soul or psyche necessitates an embracing of such paradox and involves a move from confrontation to integration. But how does Jung then connect his psychological descriptions with the language of **Kundalini** yoga? I would like to highlight the ways in which Jung speaks of **Kundalini** as it relates to the process of individuation with the following passages from his lecture series on the subject in 1932 [IBID]:

“From the standpoint of the gods this world is less than child’s play; it is a seed in the earth, a mere potentiality. Our whole world of consciousness is only a seed of the future. And when you succeed in the awakening of **Kundalini**, so that she begins to move out her mere potentiality, you necessarily start a world which is a world of eternity, totally different from our world...” (Pg. 26)

“Now, if the yogini or the Western person succeeds in awakening **Kundalini**, what starts is not in any way a personal development, though of course and impersonal development can influence the personal status, as it does very often and very favorably. But it is not always so. What starts are the impersonal happenings with which you should not identify. If you do, you will soon feel obnoxious consequences, you will get an inflation, you will get all wrong. That is one of the great difficulties in experiencing the unconscious, that one identifies with it and becomes a fool. You must not identify with the unconscious; you must keep outside, detached, and observe objectively what happens. But you then see that all the events that happen in the impersonal, non human order of things have the very disagreeable quality that they cling to us, or we cling to them. It is as if the **Kundalini** in its movement upward were pulling us up with it, as if we were part of that movement, particularly in the beginning...” (Pg. 27)

“To activate the unconscious means to awaken the divine, the *devi*, **Kundalini** . to begin the development of the suprapersonal within the individual in order to kindle the light of the gods...” (Pg. 68)

... “[T]he concept of **Kundalini** has for us only one use, that is to describe our own experiences with the unconscious, the experiences that have to do with the initiation of the suprapersonal processes...” (Pg. 70)

I would like to let these passages stand as references for grounding further discussion of **Kundalini** in the language and psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. Jungian analyst **James Hillman**, founder of the School of Archetypal Psychology, and **Lee Sanella, M.D.**, cofounder of the **Kundalini Clinic** in Oakland, California, both continue in Jung’s footsteps to translate the **Kundalini** experience in terms of psychological and psychiatric understandings. In ***Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*** by **Gopi Krishna**, describes his impressions of what it was that he was indeed awakening to when he writes:

“Little did I realize that from that day onwards I was never to be my old normal self again, that I had unwittingly and without preparation or even adequate knowledge of it roused to activate the most wonderful and stern power in man, that I had stepped unknowingly upon the key to the most guarded secret of the ancients, and that thenceforth for a long time I had to live suspended by a thread, swinging between life on the one hand and death on the other, between sanity and insanity, between light and darkness, between heaven and earth...” [6]

In a way of response, **James Hillman** introduces his psychological commentary on **Gopi Krishna’s** accounts with the following passage:

“So it is with great reverence to him and to the culture from which he has risen that I add these short comments as an act of gratitude. It is my intention neither to explain or to defend what **Gopi Krishna** has written, but only to relate where I am able some of his experiences to Western depth psychology, especially to the process of individuation as described in the Analytical Psychology of **C.G. Jung**...” [7]

The importance of such a commentary on the relatedness of the **Kundalini** experience to Western depth psychology and Jungian thought has much to do

with the fact that the experience is easy to disbelieve, to interpret as an experience of psychosis or madness, to be debunked or deconstructed as meaningless. Sadly, there are many stories of Westerners who have unexpected or unprepared-for awakenings like **Gopi Krishna** describes, who are committed to asylums, unnecessary psychiatric medication, or who have to deal with the alienation of being misunderstood and the depression that comes with the invalidation of intense and potentially enlightening life experiences. Hillman's commentary provides a bridge that can sometimes seem unbridgeable between a powerful religious experience or transformation and its psychological integration, and it is a healing bridge.

In ***The Kundalini Experience: Psychosis or Transcendence?***, Lee Sannella explains similar intentions behind his book:

“As for this present book, two interconnected theses are strongly argued. The first is that a process of psycho-physiological transmutation, most usefully viewed as the ‘awakening of **Kundalini**’, is indeed a reality. The second is that this process in part of an evolutionary mechanism and that as such it must not be viewed as a pathological development. Rather, I will strongly propose that the **Kundalini** process is an aspect of human psycho-spiritual unfolding that is intrinsically desirable...” [8]

**Sannella** gives cross-cultural examples of the **Kundalini** phenomenon and provides many descriptions of individuals' experiences of **Kundalini** awakening along with people's own personal accounts. He notes that the experience seems to have become more common in the last century and offers the following explanation:

“People experience **Kundalini** more frequently because they are actually more involved in disciplines and life-styles conducive to psycho-spiritual transformation. Since the **LSD** revolution of the 1960's, the employment of non-rational (not merely irrational!) methods of awareness expansion or intensification has become increasingly acceptable, even fashionable, in certain sectors of our Western society. New therapies involving some form of meditative practice have sprung up. Hundreds of thousands of people, we are now informed, practice **Transcendental Meditation (TM)**. Many are engaged in **Yoga, Vedanta**, and the different schools of **Buddhism, Zen, Vajrayana, Mahayana, Theravada**, [and **Vipassana**]. An even larger number of people pursue psychic arts, like dowsing, ‘channeling’ (mediumism), magic, witchcraft, and psychic healing. And many more have passive interest in, if not fascination for, such matters...” [9]

As the non-rational flowers into a more acceptable way of being, as respect for the diversity of culture and the multicultural world increases, as boundaries between East and West are bridged and interconnected, as our consciousness becomes more planetary and more global with the post-modern era, the internet revolution, and the revival of interest and practice in religion and spirituality, we may be able to see and experience more fertile ground for the growth and awakening of **Kundalini** and the walk on the path of individuation both on a private, individual level and on a public communitarian level.

Despite the increase in acceptance of the reality and legitimacy of the **Kundalini** experience, there is still so much confusion. There is still a real issue concerning

**Kundalini** and the experience of psychosis. Almost all writings on the subject warn of its potential dangers and speak in no uncertain terms of the madness that can come about with the awakening of ‘the serpent power’ as the **Kundalini** is often symbolically known. **Gopi Krishna** writes about the volatility of the experience in his article ‘**The Sudden Awakening of Kundalini**’ when he writes:

“The awakening may be gradual or sudden, varying in intensity and effect according to the development, constitution, and temperament of different individuals; but in most cases it results in a greater instability of the emotional nature and a greater liability to aberrant mental conditions in the subject, mainly owing to tainted heredity, faulty modes of conduct, or immoderation in any shape or form. Leaving out the extreme cases, which end in madness, this generalization applies to all the categories of men [and women] in whom **Kundalini** is congenitally more or less active, comprising mystics, mediums, men [and women] of genius, and those of an exceptionally high intellectual or artistic development only a shade removed from genius. In the case of those in whom the awakening occurs all at once as the result of yoga or other spiritual practices, the sudden impact of powerful vital currents on the brain and other organs is often attended with grave risk and strange mental conditions, varying from moment to moment, exhibiting in the beginning the abnormal peculiarities of a medium, mystic, genius, and madman all rolled into one...” [10]

The intensity and instability of the awakening and the experiences it brings should not be underestimated and indeed the image of playing with fire is appropriate when speaking of any actions which could intentionally or unintentionally awaken the force of **Kundalini**. Along these lines, **Alice A. Bailey**, author of many books of esoteric wisdoms, writes in her article, ‘**The Danger of Arousing Kundalini**’:

“Much danger and dire calamity attend the man [or woman] who arouses these centers by unlawful methods; and who experiments with the fires of his body without the needed technical knowledge. He [or she] may, by his [or her] efforts, succeed in arousing the fires and in intensifying the action of the centers, but he [or she] will pay the price of ignorance in the destruction of matter, in the burning of bodily brain tissue, in the development of insanity, and in opening the door to currents and forces, undesirable and destructive. It is not the part of a coward, in these matters concerning the subject life, to move with caution and with care; it is the part of discretion. The aspirant, therefore, has three things to do:

- 1. Purify, discipline, and transmute his [or her] lower nature.**
- 2. Develop knowledge of him [or her] self, and equip his [or her] mental body; build the causal body (soul) by good deeds and thoughts.**
- 3. Serve his [or her] race in utter self-abnegation... [11]**

The point of these warnings is to recognize the power of the forces involved, the inability of our finite egoic selves to understand what is going on with the energies of the universe, and to inculcate a God-fearing sensibility within the heart of the earnest seeker; not as a scare tactic but for the sake of equipping the individual with good spiritual and psychological survival skills. In this sense fear is healthy and furthermore, despite warnings of craziness, there is a real sense in which psychosis, while definitely a significant danger when awakening **Kundalini** and confronting and integrating the unconscious, is not the bottom line. Madness is not the bottom line.

In a recorded live workshop entitled, '**Kundalini: Path of Spiritual Emergence**', **Christina Grof**, founder of the **Spiritual Emergence Network**, emphasizes the reality and yet non-essentiality of madness in the **Kundalini** experience when she describes people who experienced alienation and misunderstanding through their experiences:

"There are the people that are the ones who are consistently the most heart-rending for me who were coming and saying, *'I made the mistake of telling the wrong people, I was having all these experiences going on, I was afraid, I thought I was crazy, the people around me thought I was crazy, you know we didn't know what else to do. And so I was put in the hospital, I was given electro-shocks. And meanwhile, something in me, through all of that, something in me knew that what was going on wasn't craziness. Something in me knew that there was something else. But I didn't know how to think about it and the people around me didn't know how to think about it. Now I'm through it and I realized what it was and I'm a very different person than I was when that all began. How can I be there for other people? You know I'd really like this to keep from happening to other people. Who can I talk to?'* So it was at that point that in talking in this way, suddenly we began to be known for some alternative approaches to psychosis ... [12]

**Christina Grof** considers the **Kundalini** experience to be a kind of spiritual emergence or **Spiritual Emergency**. She compares the awakening to the birth process and sees that if allowed to happen unblocked, there could be more natural and supportive communities and contexts to help that emergence come about.

**Lee Sannella** echoes **Grof's** push toward alternative approaches to psychosis when he writes:

"... [H]ow many creative people in our culture are suffering because of diagnostic mistakes? I feel that the healing profession has a special obligation to make every effort to correct these mistakes. Recognition of the **Kundalini** phenomenon as a non-psychotic process is a part of this. It is tragic that potentially charismatic folks like shamans, trance mediums, and God-intoxicated individuals (similar to the **Masts** of India) might actually find themselves in custodial care in our society. Possibly there are many now who, despite their eccentricities, should be released so that they can enrich our lives ..." [13]

The atmosphere of acceptance for these experiences and these people in society needs to grow and warm up. There is as much fear of as there is fascination with non-ordinary states of consciousness in this world. Materialism and rationalism are modes of thinking and being which have determined and dominated the modern age and, while they are legitimate systems in their own right, they tend to deny the legitimacy and possibility of other ways of being, knowing, and existing. To a certain extent, the fear of madness and the experiences of psychosis that come with the process of individuation and **Kundalini** awakening comes from the revolutionary threat that the experience brings to the notion of rationality and to the material plane as the be all and end all of existence. The other side of this shadow perception of the craziness of these phenomena is the possibility of liberation from these limited ways of egoic being and the integration of a more holistic sense of self in the world.

This more holistic sense that comes has to do with an opening up to a fuller reality that accepts both the good and the evil within human nature that lets us realize the interconnectedness of all people and things and their spiritual source. The opening is described by classical texts and modern psychological and poetic sources as a tapping into our intuitive wellsprings, a tuning into our inner guide, and as a rootedness to a unitive sense of being. With these ancient and more recent understandings, perhaps we can walk through the chaos, confusion, and misunderstanding into a more complete and peaceful relationship with the universe and with each other.

**Kundalini** needn't be taken literally, and even though there are classical maps for the human spiritual-energy system and detailed descriptions of how the energy transformations take place with the **Kundalini** awakening. Different symbolic language is used to get at the emotional and spiritual experience of **Kundalini**. The energy is described as a serpent because of the way it is coiled around the base of the spine and rises around and up the spinal cord and then up through the head. Visions and dreams of snakes often occur with the awakening. In terms of spiritual development, the image of a snake shedding its skin is a poignant metaphor for the process of refining the self and shedding the gross and material layers of egoic skin and armor.

The **kundalini** energy is considered female and is sometimes described as the sleeping beauty. Some translate **Kundalini** as coming from the **Sanskrit** word **kundal**, meaning 'the curl of the hair of the beloved', implying an intimate and erotic relationship between the immanent and transcendent God. In a song by **Donovan**, from his album 'Sutras', he describes such a relationship in 'The Lady of the Lamp':

### **Lady of the Lamp**

In the night, in the dark night  
There's a light, it shines on me  
And the lady of the lamp she  
Lies by me and holds on tight  
In my mind, in constant mind  
I am restless yet sincere  
And the lady of the lamp fears  
Nothing, she's the mystic guide  
In this life, in this dark veil  
One is rarely truly loved  
And the lady of the lamp loves  
Only me she is my grail  
In the dawn, in the blue dawn  
When the sun begins to rise  
The lady of the lamp sighs  
Darkness passed and gone  
Darkness passed and gone [14]

Through this song we can feel a more poetic sense of the awakening. It's a coming of dawn, a passing out of darkness, a light, a lamp, a mystic guide, a true love, a grail. Donovan is describing a relationship such as with **Kundalini** from the other side of the fence, from the perspective of someone who has traveled through the madness and arrived at a more love-filled and meaning-felt relationship with the divine. He expresses an enlightened relationship to the individuating energy of **Kundalini**.

**Kundalini** has to do with enlightenment but isn't necessarily enlightenment and more importantly, should not be considered the end of the road or even an accomplishment or a goal. **Gopi Krishna** warns of the traps of egoically identifying with the psycho-spiritual changes that are happening with **Kundalini** awakening when in the following poem he writes:

**“Not even a shadow of the thought  
Of victory should cross your mind,  
When with the inner changes wrought  
The coiled-up power starts to unwind...” [15]**

And yet **Gopi Krishna** felt very strongly about the importance of holding **Kundalini** as a major key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe and the ills of the human condition when he writes:

“There is no other way save this [kundalini] open to man to arrive at the solution of an otherwise impenetrable mystery of creation, no other way open to him to find out what path has been aligned for his progress by nature, no other way for him to know and recognize himself, and no other way to save himself from the awful consequence of conscious or unconscious violation of the mighty laws which rule his destiny. This is the only method to bridge the gulf at present yawning between science and religion, between warring political ambitions and ideologies, more deadly than the most virulent disease and more awful than all the epidemic combined, between religious faiths, races, nations, classes, and finally between men. This immortal light, held aloft by nature from time immemorial to guide the faltering footsteps of erring humanity across the turns and twists, ups and downs, of the winding path of evolution, the light which shone in the prophets and sages of antiquity, which continues to shine in the men [and women] of genius and seers of today, and will continue to shine for all eternity, illuminating the vast amphitheatre of the universe for the marvelous, unending play of the eternal, almighty, queen of creation, life...” [16]

A friend, who studied and practiced **Kundalini** and experienced an awakening, said he thinks **Gopi Krishna** is a bit fanatical in the ways in which he talks about the subject. **Gopi Krishna**, however, is considered one of the most important writers and proponents of further study on **Kundalini** and feels that we should be walking toward an understanding of this great evolutionary energy within us all with tremendous humility and selflessness.

How does one balance between realizing and manifesting something as overwhelmingly intense as the Godly and not getting on an ego trip about it? Stephen Gaskin, a spiritual teacher and counter-cultural leader, talked about knowing the difference between the **God** and the **Godzilla** within. The Jewish sages recommend that we remind ourselves to stay in that kind of balance in the following way:



In one pocket a person should have a little piece of paper which says, '**For your sake was the world created**' which is a line from the Talmud basically saying that the world and your experiences in it and with loved ones are gifts from God and you are the inheritor of God's infinite love and blessings. But in case that truth makes you feel special or proud, you should have another piece of paper in your other pocket that says, '**I am only dust and ashes**' which is what **Midrash** tells us Abraham said when God came to him in a vision. So you can think to yourself, 'the whole entire world was created for my sake' and yet who am I but dust and ashes?.' Think about that and identify with both sides at once.

And as the ego dissolves into soul, and the dross is filtered from the silver and your heart can more and more contain that paradox, the farther you go along the road of individuation that never ends, not even at enlightenment. In tune with that note I will conclude with the following passage by **Christopher Hills** called '**Is Kundalini Real?**':

"Once a human being is enlightened this is not the end of the road as most people think, but only the beginning of a humiliating task. The job of communicating it back through all the levels from the highest inspiration of the imagination down through the conceptual mind and into the physical manifestation is no easy task. In fact, it represents the greatest challenge of the entire world, beside which all other tasks appear easy. It is easier to become president of a country or become a famous person than to speak one word from the level of the nuclear center and manifest it in the lives of others. The beings who have achieved this in the entire history of man, who speak to us through the minds of **Christ** and **Buddha**, **Lao Tsu** and **Krishna**, are those who have this power to make the unnamable realm of God come alive in the heart..." [17]

I know that I could not have done justice to the subject of **Kundalini** in this paper. I am not on the level that **Hills** describes above. The importance of this essay then, has to do with the direction in which these words are pointing which I hope is in tune and in harmony with the direction that the divine urge within is taking us. It's the same divine urge that Jung describes in the opening quote, so it may behoove us all to read it again. As it was in the beginning so shall it be in the end.

## THE END

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### THE END NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Jung, Carl Gustav. **The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga, Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932 by C.G. Jung.** Edited by Sonu Shamdasani. Princeton University Press. New Jersey. 1996. Pg. 21.

<sup>2</sup> White, John ed. **Kundalini: Evolution and Enlightenment.** Paragon Press. New York. 1990. Pg. 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Sanella, Lee, M.D. **The Kundalini Experience: Psychosis or Transcendence?.** Integral Publishing. California. 1987, 1992. Pg. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Bennet, E.A. **What Jung Really Said.** Schocken Books. New York. 1966, 1983. Pg. 171 & 173.

- <sup>5</sup> Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Vintage Books. New York. 1963, 1989. Pg. 395-396.
- <sup>6</sup> Jung, Carl Gustav. *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932 by C.G. Jung*. Edited by Sonu Shamdasani. Princeton University Press. New Jersey. 1996.
- <sup>7</sup> Krishna, Gopi. *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man . With Psychological Commentary by James Hillman*. Shambala. Boston & London. 1967, 1997. Pg. 16-17.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 39.
- <sup>9</sup> Sannella, Lee, M.D. *The Kundalini Experience: Psychosis or Transcendence?*. Integral Publishing. California. 1987. Pg. 11.
- <sup>10</sup> Krishna, Gopi. .*The Sudden Awakening of Kundalini*. from White, John ed. *Kundalini: Evolution and Enlightenment*. Paragon Press. New York. 1990. Pg. 199-200.
- <sup>11</sup> Bailey, Alice A. .*The Danger of Arousing Kundalini*. from White, John ed. *Kundalini: Evolution and Enlightenment*. Paragon Press. New York. 1990. Pg. 452.
- <sup>12</sup> Grof, Christina. .*Kundalini: Path of Spiritual Emergence..* Sounds True Recordings. 1989.
- <sup>13</sup> Sannella, Lee, M.D. *The Kundalini Experience: Psychosis or Transcendence?*. Integral Publishing. California. 1987, 1992. Pg. 111-112.
- <sup>14</sup> Donovan. .*The Lady of the Lamp..* From *Sutras*. The 1997 album on America recordings.
- <sup>15</sup> Krishna, Gopi. *From The Way to Self Knowledge*.
- <sup>16</sup> Krishna, Gopi. *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*. Shambala. Boston & London. 1967, 1997. Pg. 250.
- <sup>17</sup> Hills, Christopher. .*Is Kundalini Real?*. from White, John ed. *Kundalini: Evolution and Enlightenment*. Paragon Press. New York. 1990. Pg. 119.