

# Analysis of Spiritual Awakening in a Kundalini Tradition: Psychological Change and Spiritual Growth

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*ABSTRACT:* The intent of this study was to achieve an in-depth understanding of psychological change and spiritual growth as experienced by individuals within a single *kundalini*-based yoga tradition. A case study design was employed. The experience of transformation following a *kundalini* awakening among practitioners of a single Indian spiritual tradition was examined through the eyes of its adherents: householders, ashram residents and monks. Because each spiritual tradition has a unique culture, an ethnographic method of study was employed for analysis. Results showed far-reaching effects of long-term transformation touching virtually every aspect of life, including values, priorities, the body, mind, relationships, work and one's relation to the environment. Changes included an expanded self-concept, moving from a limited self, identified with the mind and body, to a universal Self of infinite extent, as well as increased experience of higher states of consciousness.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries North Americans and Europeans have become increasingly interested in studying and practicing the spiritual traditions of India (Brooks & Bailly, 1997; Walsh, 1983; Watts, 2017; Woollacott et al., 2021). Though Western scholars and practitioners have acquired many insights into these traditions, misunderstandings have also occurred (Brooks & Bailly, 1997; Walsh, 1983). Western scholars often equate yogic traditions with Indian spirituality and religion; however, there is also a recognition among clinical psychologists that these traditions provide practices and insight regarding human development and psychological growth (Watts, 2017).

Modern meditative yoga philosophy and its associated psychological applications are based largely on the teachings of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, and the idealist nondual philosophies of Kashmir Shaivism and Advaita Vedanta. In many of these traditions, energetic awakening is described in detail (Krishna, 1993; Lakshmanjoo, 2003; Muktananda, 1994; Silburn, 1988). This awakening is considered to be the spontaneous emergence of the dormant *kundalini* energy, referred to as the biological mechanism that drives both individual enlightenment and evolution of the species toward higher consciousness (Greyson, 2000), though yogic traditions do not consider it materially based, but rather a form of infinite Consciousness expressing itself as the material world. Since it is critical to understand the concept of *kundalini* awakening, which is not widely disseminated in western culture, the yogic context for this concept is discussed.

According to nondual Tantric philosophy (see *Tantraloka* [Light on the Tantra] and the *Pratyabhijnahridayam* [Doctrine of Recognition]) (Muller-Ortega, 1997; Singh, 2015; Wallis, 2013, 2017), the source of creation, infinite Consciousness, during the process of creation masks its boundless nature, as it becomes the limited

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individual conscious self in all creatures. In the process of creation this Consciousness also assumes forms of the energy (*kundalini* is the superordinate one) that animates the universe.

*Kundalini*, also referred to as *shakti*<sup>1</sup>, is considered to be the power of Consciousness that both gives rise to the universe and that governs all physiological processes within living beings. As *kundalini* takes the form of an individual, their knowledge of their own true nature as infinite Consciousness is concealed. At a certain point in the individual's evolution across lifetimes, *kundalini*, also considered the innate power to know oneself as infinite Consciousness, is awakened. A principal way in which it awakens is through initiation (*shaktipat-diksha*) from an enlightened master. *Shaktipat* literally means "the descent of power"; it is considered to be an influx of infinite Consciousness and the most important event in the life of a spiritual aspirant (Edwards, 2013; Wallis, 2017). The experience of *kundalini* awakening varies widely, from subtle to dramatic, and initiates a long-term transformational process of expansion and transformation of consciousness driven by *kundalini* and the long-term application of yoga practices.<sup>2</sup>

In the Tantric tradition, the rare individual who is able to awaken *kundalini* energy and guide the student on the spiritual path is considered a *sadguru*, a true teacher and thus the Guru-Disciple relationship is considered to be essential to the tradition. Woodroffe (1978) indicates the critical importance of having such a guru, who has successfully completed the transformative process of *kundalini* awakening and, by virtue of that attainment, has become one with *kundalini*, one with infinite Consciousness and freed from the confines of the ordinary mind. Thus, such a guru is empowered to pass on that awakened energy of transformation, to a disciple, thereby catalyzing the same process of extraordinary transformation in the disciple. *Kundalini* is the inner guru guiding the transformation from within. The liberated state of the guru and the capacity to transmit the awakened *kundalini* are considered central to the guru's role. This rare ability to pass on awakened *kundalini* is critical to how and why individuals become deeply committed to such a guru, and the teaching and practices offered by the guru. *Kundalini* is seen to act through the teacher both in the initial awakening process and through the guru's guidance of the *kundalini* process to its safe and successful completion. *Kundalini* as the inner guru and as the root power of the individual serving as the guru, as well as the context for the guru/disciple relationship are key to the transformative results the participants report experiencing.

After *kundalini* awakening, the transformation of the individual is described as occurring through a process of purification as *kundalini* moves through the body and mind. This process is aided by the *kundalini* transmitted through the guru and yoga practices (e.g., meditation, mantra repetition, study and selfless service) empowered by the awakened *kundalini*. This clearing process is considered to include spontaneous emotional purification in which negative emotions or emotional blocks are brought up, sometimes into consciousness, sometimes outwardly expressed, and then dissolved by the awakened energy. The process has been described as complete when the individual continuously experiences the highest knowledge and inexpressible joy, with *kundalini* stabilized in the crown center of universal Consciousness. This signifies the attainment of the highest

state of samadhi or enlightenment, that is, the absorption into the state of absolute nondual Consciousness (Shantananda, 2003). This is the ultimate goal of this TKY.

The tradition also asserts that our essential nature, our Self, is pure, unbounded, infinite Consciousness and that all human suffering arises from forms of wrong identification, identifying with only a limited part of what we truly are, i.e., identifying with our body, mind, or limited roles. The primary aim of the yogic path is the realization of the true nature of our Self (Ajaya, 2007; Brooks, 1997; Muktananda, 1994; Singh, 2015). This transformation from a limited to an expanded sense of self is accomplished through varied practices, including meditation, chanting and mantra repetition, all aimed at stilling constantly reverberating thoughts and enabling states of pure awareness (Walsh, 1983).

Many western trained psychologists have studied meditative and other yogic practices and advocate the use of a variety of these practices, for their psychotherapeutic benefits such as reduced anxiety and depression (Walsh, 1983). However, since some psychologists have a limited understanding of the goals, practices and transformational effects of yoga, they often misinterpret their clients' experiences and aims (Grof & Grof, 1989, 2017; Kason, 1994; Woollacott et al., 2021).

This misinterpretation of yogic experiences by psychologists and other health care providers is characterized by some researchers as a paradigm clash between the Western psychological models, which are materialist, and Eastern yogic traditions, which are idealist (Walsh, 1983; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Walsh states that when traditional psychological and meditative models are compared one sees an apparent *paradigm clash* as described by Kuhn (1970). Walsh notes:

Claims for the existence of true higher states will tend to be dismissed, since the usual state of consciousness is believed to be optimal, and there is thus little place in most Western models for anything better. Not only will they usually be dismissed, but because many of the experiences accompanying these states are unknown in the Western model, they are likely to be viewed as pathological. (Walsh, p. 24)

For example, one Freudian psychiatrist stated that he considered all altered states of consciousness produced by meditation as pathological states of regression (Edwards, 1987). In addition, students of yoga have often sought help from clinicians in order to better understand their experiences related to their yogic practice, only to have the clinician dismiss their belief system, and discount or even pathologize their experiences (Edwards, 1987; Grof, 1983; Grof & Grof, 1989, 2017). Greyson recently confirmed this perspective, stating:

There is a long tradition among psychiatrists and psychologists of regarding spiritually transformative experiences as evidence of pathology...[and..] with the rise of neurocognitive psychology in recent decades, skeptical neuroscientists have reinterpreted spiritual experiences not as neurotic defense

mechanisms but rather as meaningless hallucinations produced by the brain. (Greyson, 2014, pp. 124, 125)

Recent research (Woollacott et al., 2021) that questioned participants regarding the response of clinicians to their sharing the experience of an energetic awakening noted that 80% of respondents found the clinician's response unsatisfactory. For example, one individual said that their doctor "disregarded it entirely" and a second said that the doctor "didn't think things like this happen," saying that it was "only your imagination" (Woollacott et al., p. 533).

As a consequence of this dissonance in worldviews between meditation practitioners and many clinicians, a number of researchers have brought a reductionistic approach to their studies resulting in misinterpretations (Edwards, 1987; Sannella, 1987; Woollacott et al., 2021). However, in recent years, this trend has begun to change, with considerably more published research on the effects of yogic practice appearing. A number of research studies have examined the nature of energetic (*kundalini*) awakenings and transformation that may occur both spontaneously and through a variety of triggering events (e.g., a spiritual teacher, meditation, intense spiritual study, near-death experiences, and psychological trauma) (Greyson, 2000, 2014; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Woollacott et al., 2021). Though these studies on the general phenomenon of *kundalini* awakening have been very informative, few studies have carefully examined the post-awakening experiences of students within a specific tradition. Corby et al. (1978) warned that not all meditation or yoga traditions are alike in their effect, and thus mixing traditions together in a study is inappropriate. Since many research studies on transformational effects of yogic practice have interpreted results only according to western psychological theory, we believe a new broader approach, examining transformation within the context of yogic theory, would add needed balance and clarity to examination of the process (Glick, 1983; Wilcox, 1984; Wilson 1982, 1985).

Thus, the purpose of the study was to describe in detail, as free as possible from the lens of western psychology and the researchers' own assumptions, the perspective of members from a single spiritual community regarding the changes they perceived in their lives as a result of *kundalini* awakening and their ensuing transformation. In this study we focus not on the awakening, but on the effects of the long-term process. For this purpose, a case study approach was used that employed an ethnographic method for in-depth interviews of the participants. The tradition of *kundalini* yoga (TKY) that was chosen was one in which the researchers had long-term experiences as practitioners and thus they could be considered scholar-practitioners<sup>3</sup>.

## Methods

### Setting and Sample

The setting of this study is the extended community of the TKY students. There are no geographical boundaries to the community as there are students located

around the world. The community consists of a global Hindu-based community, including persons from Judeo-Christian communities in Europe and the Americas, from East Asian communities of Japan, Korea and China, as well as from Indian communities with Hindu-based philosophies. However, the students in this study lived in the United States. The ashram used in this study was on the East Coast of the U.S.

The sample was composed of three groups of individuals, representing three distinct contexts in which individuals practiced this TKY. They were monks (swamis), long-term ashram residents, and householders. The monks were permanent ashram residents and the most prominent teachers of the tradition below the guru. Out of 24 monks, three monks who were available for in person interviews were approached and agreed to participate. Two of the original three swamis participated through the entirety of the study. The third swami had to be replaced twice as they were transferred out of country; thus, a total of five participated in the study. The second group of individuals were long-term residents (single or married, including families) of the ashram, living and offering service full time. There were approximately 250 residents in the ashram at this time. Four long-term ashram residents were in the second group. The third group, householder students, lived in the community as opposed to the ashram. This group consisted of individuals who were single or married, working at normal jobs, having families, homes, etc. Estimates of their worldwide numbers are in the tens of thousands; however, there is no official membership in the group. Four householders participated in the study.

Inclusion criteria for the study were: (a) currently practicing this TKY, (b) practicing this TKY for at least 10 years, and (c) at least two years of living in a TKY ashram (or combined shorter stays). The intent of the criteria was to ensure that views of the people interviewed represented the culture and also reflected the intent of the study, to examine long-term effects of *kundalini* awakening and the practices. All participants were guaranteed anonymity, to ensure that they could be candid in expressing their views and experiences. Basic demographics are shown in Table 1.

## Study Design

The basic design of the research was a case study design. The intent was to achieve an in-depth understanding of psychological change and spiritual growth as experienced and described by individuals practicing this TKY. The experience of practicing within this TKY was examined through the eyes of its adherents: householders, long-term ashram residents and monks. The four householders, four ashram residents and three monks originally chosen were considered a sufficient sample given the in-depth study design (Glaser & Strauss, 1980). Similar studies by Glick (1983) and Conser (1984) used 12 and 3 participants respectively. Because this is a unique culture, an ethnographic method of study was employed for analysis. Spradley (2016, p. 11) explains the purpose of ethnography as “seek[ing] to document the existence of alternative realities and to describe those realities in their own terms.”

**Table 1**  
*Demographics*

Participant type	No. in group (total: 13)		Marital status (married, single, divorced)	Mean yrs. practicing in tradition	Mean Yrs. in ashram	Occupation	Mean no. of times interviewed
	Gender						
<b>Householder</b>	4	2M 2F	3 Mar, 1 S	10.9	5.3	1 PhD student 1 Mother 1 Univ. Admin. 1 Entrepreneur	3.0
<b>Long-term Ashram Resident</b>	4	2M 2F	1 Mar, 1 Div, 2 S	11.0	6.5	All Ashram staff	2.8
<b>Monk</b>	5	4M 1F	4 S, 1 Div	11.0	9.4	All Monks	2.0

Abbreviations: M: Male; F: Female; S: Single; Mar: Married, Div: Divorced

## Data Collection

The primary means for gathering data was interviews (carried out in 1985-86<sup>4</sup>, structured using the principles of ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 2016). This method uses tandem interviewing, in which one interview and analysis picks up where the last one left off. This method pools information from participants, thereby allowing them to validate and extend material from each other. The pooling of information produced a summary review, validated by the participants, as the next to final stage of analysis.

Spradley's method was chosen for its ability to bring out salient features of a given milieu while expressing them in the native terms of that milieu. This is essential for understanding a culture such as this TKY from the perspective of the yogic paradigm, which is the source of its native terminology. In this method persons are interviewed several (typically three) times with interviews recorded verbatim. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes, averaging 1 hour each. Using Spradley's method, each interview was analyzed for what it revealed about categories of experience, native terms and concepts, and relationships between concepts, experiences and terms, for ways of processing one's experience, etc., using thematic analysis.

## Analysis

The initial interview material was analyzed, and tentative conclusions, hypotheses, and categories were fed into subsequent interviews for verification, expansion, and additional data gathering. The results of the analyses were combined to give a general description of the TKY culture as validated by its members, its basic themes and in-depth analysis of long-term psychological change and spiritual growth, as defined by the participants. As the analysis of the interviews progressed it became evident that similar categories of change were emerging from each group. In order to facilitate the validation, the analyzed material from all groups was pooled and summarized in a summary review that reduced over 1400 pages of transcripts into 30 pages. The summary review was sent to the participants for

review, validation and expansion. Their responses were then compared to see if the groups differed in their experiences of change, in the way they viewed change, etc.

## Results

The main question addressed in this paper is, after receiving initiation (*shaktipat*), and the subjective experience of awakening of *kundalini* energy, what types of long-term change do TKY practitioners experience? Long-term changes are summarized relative to the seven categories of transformation and spiritual growth identified by the study participants: mental, emotional, physical, relational, conceptual, attitudinal, values/priorities. The tables below show each statement and the percentage of participants who confirmed that they believed the statement applied to themselves (Self), other students personally known to them (Other), or was typical of students of the tradition in general (Typical). A review of the responses from individuals in the three different groups found no substantial differences between the householders, long-term ashram residents and monks except in the category of relational changes. As a result, data from all three groups were combined and reported together.

### Mental Changes

Table 2 shows the statements related to mental changes. One prominent feature is that 91-100% of the participants validated all but two of the 21 statements (with the other two being at 73% or above). Long term mental changes considered by participants to be the most important (starred) included: a quieter mind with fewer thoughts, development of witness consciousness, a stronger more disciplined mind, increased ability to focus and maintain focus, being less rigid and better able to adapt, being more conscious of and less automatically influenced by shifts in emotional moods and feelings, decreased identification with the body, the mind and its contents, and the mind becoming stronger and subtler, thus better able to sustain more expanded states of consciousness.

Less rigidity and better adaptability were reflected in learning to go with the flow and detachment from desires to have things the way one wants them rather than the way they are. Participants noted that engaging in the TKY practices stresses the importance of surrender, specifically surrendering the ego's need to control life in an ego-centric way. Surrendering ego-centric thinking enhances the ability to know and serve the divine Self in each moment. Spending time participating in the tradition's meditation practices while residing in centers and ashrams associated with this tradition teaches that surrender. For example, one householder commented, "Being around the ashram and being around the Guru is just giving up having to run the world the way it is supposed to be run – my way! I've always run my business. So I can give that up in the ashram... There's some kind of freedom in that, in accepting whatever comes. It was easier to accept given the kind of spiritual grounding from being with the Guru and being in the ashram..." (The term spiritual grounding can be thought of as going beyond ego concerns and

**Table 2**  
*Mental Changes*

Label	Description	Self	Other	Typical
		Total n=11	Total n=11	Total n=11
a	A quieter mind, fewer thoughts*	91%	100%	73%
b	Development of witness consciousness***	100%	100%	82%
c	Development of intuition	91%	100%	73%
d	Greater creativity	91%	100%	64%
e	Greater inspiration	100%	100%	82%
f	Stronger more disciplined mind*	100%	100%	73%
g	Increased ability to focus and maintain focus, e.g. better study habits, increased reading ability, longer attention span*	100%	100%	73%
h	Increased ability for logical thinking	73%	73%	45%
i	Less rigid, better able to adapt to and go with changing demands of one's environment**	100%	100%	45%
j	More conscious of and less automatically influenced by shifts in emotional moods and feelings*	100%	100%	55%
k	More conscious of and less automatically influenced by societal norms and values	100%	91%	55%
l	Better able to translate thoughts and ideas into actions and reality	100%	91%	45%
m	Decreased identification with the mind and its contents*	100%	100%	64%
n	Shift from feeling ruled by the mind to ruling the mind and being able to control its content, thought patterns and processes	91%	91%	45%
o	Conceptual changes (see separate heading)	100%	91%	73%
p	Attitudinal changes (see separate heading)	100%	100%	73%
q	Changes in values and priorities (see separate heading)	100%	91%	73%
r	Process of spontaneous mental purification (see separate heading) in which the mind may race, thoughts may be jumbled, negative mental patterns may be intensified, periods of intense mental clarity and insightfulness occur, etc., the end result being a stronger, quieter, more functional mind created by the <i>shakti</i> .**	91%	100%	91%
s	Decreased identification with the body*	82%	100%	73%
t	The mind becomes stronger, better able to sustain higher states of consciousness**	91%	100%	73%
u	The mind becomes subtler, able to apply finer, more subtle discrimination and able to grasp subtler truths, scriptures and the Guru's teachings*	100%	100%	64%

Note: \* = most important for 1 person: 1 \*/person

putting into action the detachment and expanded view of the Self being present in each moment and each person, which comes from the basic practices.)

The two items that had less than 91% validation and still were strongly supported by over two-thirds of participants were an increased ability for logical thinking [73%] and decreased identification with the body [82%]. Interestingly, one long-term resident noted under ability for logical thinking, "at times [I have] less ability or at least less interest in logical thinking." This suggests that one may move at



times to a more intuitive nonlinear way of thinking, which is more wholistic in its approach (more right-brain dominant). Another long-term resident answered quite honestly, regarding decreased identification with the body, that they “still identify strongly when in pain.”

It is of interest that regarding the participants’ sense of the generalizability of these changes to all practitioners of this TKY (labeled ‘Typical’ in the table), the percentage agreement was substantially lower for many of the items (from 45% to 91%). Two factors may be operating, including, first, a reluctance to label changes as typical (that is as experienced by all students), as in this tradition there is a tacit assumption that each individual’s experience is right for them; therefore, commonality is not expected or important in itself. A second factor is related to a perceived difference by the participants, between themselves (self-identified as disciples) and the worldwide group of TKY students. From the perspective of the participants in the study, those who identify themselves as disciples are consistently more disciplined with respect to the teachings and practices within this path as compared to the world-wide group of practitioners, who show much greater variability with respect to adherence to practices within the path.

### **Emotional Changes**

Table 3 shows statements about long-term emotional changes in participants’ lives as a result of their TKY practices. A main topic discussed by participants was love, with all participants reporting a shift from ego-oriented conditional love to universal unconditional love. Additionally, experiences of love occurred more frequently and easily, with a greater acceptance and love of self and others; and increased feelings of love and devotion for both God and *Guru*.

Participants also noted a process of spontaneous emotional purification in which emotional anger and blocks were brought to awareness and then removed by the purifying energy. One monk commented, “This [emotional purification] is generally felt as part of the process for a short period; in isolated cases it [anger] is expressed.” As noted above, under mental changes, this shift typically involved a surrender of focus away from a limited self-referential perspective to a broader perspective reflecting a deeper sense of love and acceptance of self and others (i.e., Table 3, lines b-e).

Though 100% of individuals noted they experienced more positive emotions, 55% also noted that for a period of time they felt or expressed more negative emotions and 18% experienced more anger. These were viewed as part of the purification process. Some found that anger could also arise out of compassion and be expressed with respect and care for the other person.

### **Conceptual Changes**

Table 4 summarizes long-term conceptual changes (i.e., ideas and understandings about themselves, life and spirituality). Ninety-one to 100% of participants

**Table 3**  
*Emotional Changes*

Label	Description	Self	Other	Typical
		Total n=11	Total n=11	Total n=11
a	More expanded experience of love***	100%	100%	100%
b	Experience of love expands from ego-oriented conditional love to universal unconditional love	100%	100%	100%
c	Experiences of love come more frequently and more easily	100%	100%	82%
d	Greater acceptance of self and others.**	100%	100%	82%
e	Greater love for self and others**	100%	100%	82%
f	Wider range of emotions experienced	91%	91%	73%
g	Wider range of emotions expressed	82%	73%	55%
h	Smaller range of emotions expressed	27%	36%	18%
i	More negative emotions felt and/or expressed.	55%	73%	27%
j	More positive emotions felt and/or expressed*	100%	100%	67%
k	Process of spontaneous emotional purification in which negative emotions or emotional blocks are brought up, sometimes into consciousness, sometimes outwardly expressed, and then gotten rid of by the <i>shakti</i> .***	82%	91%	82%
l	Decreases in overall anxiety levels**	82%	100%	82%
m	Decreases in the strength of specific fears or anxieties*	91%	100%	64%
n	Elimination of some specific fears or anxieties	91%	100%	55%
o	Decreases in emotional neediness, e.g., reducing excessive needs for approval, needs to be liked, needs to be right, needs to succeed, etc.*	100%	100%	64%
p	Development of dispassion and detachment	100%	100%	64%
q	Decreases in or elimination of depression	82%	100%	64%
r	Increased feelings of respect for oneself and others	100%	100%	82%
s	Increased feelings of love and devotion for God	100%	100%	91%
t	Increased feelings of love and devotion for the Guru	91%	100%	100%
u	More anger	18%	64%	0
v	Less anger	82%	91%	45%
w	Purified anger – directly expressed anger that doesn't attack the other person's being or put them down but rather is directed at the offensive behaviors, attitudes, etc. displayed by the other person, anger that maintains the basic respect and integrity of the person against whom it is directed.	82%	82%	27%

Note: \* = most important for 1 person: 1 \*/person

believed their concepts and experience of the self radically transformed from a limited self that identified with the mind/body complex, to a universal Self of infinite extent. This shift towards a universal Self was accompanied by an increased sense of the range of possibilities for human growth, increased ideas and experiences of expanded states of consciousness that are personally attainable, and increased notions of self-responsibility stemming from ideas about laws of cause and effect (karma).

All of the participants felt that these shifts in ideas on spirituality moved from being simplistic notions of “sweetness and light” (e.g., always smiling) or in contrast a reclusive notion requiring withdrawal from society, both of which impede effective

**Table 4**  
*Conceptual Changes*

Label	Description	Self Total n=11	Other Total n=11	Typical Total n=11
a	Expanded Self concept; concept and experience of self radically transformed from a limited self, identified with the mind/body complex to a universal Self of infinite extent.**	91%	100%	64%
b	Shifts in ideas and experiences of what the Guru is	91%	100%	91%
c	Increased range of possibilities of human growth	91%	100%	91%
d	Increased ideas and experiences of higher states of consciousness that are personally attainable.*	91%	100%	91%
e	Shifts in one's ideas about birth and death as one-time occurrences to notions of reincarnation.*	73%	100%	100%
f	Understanding that developmental processes may occur across lifetimes rather than one life.*	91%	100%	82%
g	Increased notions of self-responsibility stemming from ideas related to the immutable laws of <i>karma</i> .*	100%	100%	73%
h	Shifts in ideas on spirituality from simplistic, sweetness and light or reclusive notions that impede effective, full functioning in the world to more mature, grounded notions of spirituality that challenge one to become and remain immersed in the experience of Divinity while giving expression to that state of consciousness through one's work, relationships, family, thoughts, daily routine activities, etc.**	100%	100%	91%
i	Shifts in notions of what God is or isn't	82%	82%	73%
	1) From God as non-existent to God as existent within oneself and the universe	82%	100%	82%
	2) From God as unknowable and unrelatable to God as a direct experience fully knowable through immersing one's self in God and relatable to, both dualistically and in unity as one's own Self	82%	100%	91%
	3) From dualistic notions and experiences of God to non-dualistic ones*	73%	100%	73%
j	Changes in one's concepts and experience of what the purpose or meaning of life is.*	100%	100%	100%
	1) Shifts from external conditions, e.g., job, status, wealth, relationships and material possessions and the pursuit thereof as determinants of life's meaning and purpose, to internal conditions, higher states of consciousness, unity with God and the pursuit thereof as the determinants of the meaning or purpose of life.	100%	100%	100%
k	Shifts in ideas and experiences of what the essential nature of a human being is, from ordinary notions to actual experiences of seeing people as luminous embodiments of divine consciousness.*	73%	100%	45%
l	Changes in one's notions and experiences of what freedom is from freedom as a condition defined by the relative absence of restraints on actions of the mind or body, to freedom defined as freedom from the mind and body, freedom as a state of consciousness unfettered by the limitations brought about by identification with the mind and body, an absolute freedom.**	91%	100%	82%
m	A shift in one's concept and experience of what bondage is from bondage as a condition relative to the amount of restraint put on one's body or mind to bondage as a condition of one's state of consciousness when one is identified with the body, mind or anything but the Self.*	100%	100%	82%

Note: \* = most important for 1 person: 1 \*/person

full functioning in the world, to more mature integrated notions of spirituality. The more mature integration belief challenges one to remain immersed in the experience of Divinity, while giving expression to that state of consciousness through one's work, relationships, family, thoughts, and daily routine activities.

Other important shifts (starred) were in concepts and experiences of what the purpose or meaning of life is. For example, participants reported a reduced interest in pursuing success in the external world (job, status, wealth, relationships and material possessions) and a concomitant increase in pursuing spiritual goals (expanded states of consciousness, unity with God). These were accompanied by important (2 stars) changes in concepts and experiences related to the nature of freedom, and its opposite, bondage. The concept of freedom shifted from a condition defined by the relative absence of restraints on actions of the mind or body (for example a freedom to express any emotion that arises), to a state of consciousness unfettered by the limitations brought about by identification with the mind and body, i.e., an absolute freedom.

Participants reported a transformation in their beliefs related to the existence and nature of God. For example, most participants (73 – 100%) reported a shift from God as nonexistent to God as existent within oneself and the universe, and a shift from God as unknowable and unrelatable, to God fully knowable through direct experience by immersing one's self in God. Finally, students reported now being able to relate to God both dualistically (e.g., as an 'other' during prayer and worship) and in unity, as one's own Self (e.g., understanding that God dwells within us as our true Self). Other general comments from householders were, "acceptance of outer, material world considerations as okay and necessary but not the primary purpose of life," and "concept blown – that I had control over my life." Long-term residents stated that they went "from seeking but not knowing the purpose of life to being very clear [about it] and on the way [to fulfilling it]" and "from not being sure who I was, to knowing that I am Divine, one with the Self."

### **Attitudinal Changes**

Table 5 shows the statements that the participants made about long-term attitudinal changes in their lives. All participants (100%) confirmed that changes in attitude allowed them to reframe painful experiences, problems and difficulties, so they were now experienced as challenges and opportunities to learn. Changes in attitude also resulted in the ability to detach from painful experiences and difficulties and to adopt a "witness" perspective. Finally, attitude changes allowed participants to see problems as a challenge, specifically learning to deal with difficulties while maintaining the highest state of consciousness (2 stars).

Though the percent of participants noting changes in attitude toward their body was slightly lower, from 73-100%, depending on the statement, this was still the vast majority. These changes included seeing the body as a temple in which divine consciousness dwells, not identifying with the body, seeing the body as a vehicle for doing the spiritual practices (*sadhana*) (starred), and not viewing the body and senses as sources of true joy or lasting happiness (also starred). Long-term residents

**Table 5**  
*Attitudinal Changes/Values and Priorities*

Label	Description	Self Total n=11	Other Total n=11	Typical Total n=11
a	Development of attitudes of respect and reverence for the <i>guru</i> , one's Self and others.	91%	100%	100%
b	Changes in attitude that reframe painful experiences, problems, difficulties, etc. as:	91%	82%	73%
	1) Challenges, as opportunities to learn	100%	100%	100%
	2) Clues from the <i>shakti</i> as to whether or not one is in tune with the <i>shakti</i> , in the flow of it*	100%	100%	82%
	3) Opportunities to make use of one's (the) <i>shakti</i>	100%	100%	64%
	4) Something to be detached from, witnessed as part of the purification process of burning off karma*	100%	100%	82%
	5) The problems are a "test" – they test your "state", test one's ability to deal with difficulties and maintain the highest state of consciousness; test one's ability to deal with obstacles and keep your <i>shakti</i> up; or they may be testing one's discrimination, surrender, commitment, detachment, love, etc.**	91%	100%	73%
c	Change in attitudes towards one's body to:	91%	91%	73%
	1) Seeing the body as a temple within which dwells the divine Self	73%	100%	55%
	2) Viewing the body as not-self; nonidentification with the body	73%	100%	27%
	3) Seeing the body as a vehicle for doing <i>sadhana</i> *	100%	91%	64%
	4) Considering the body as a vehicle for manifesting <i>shakti</i> on the physical plane of existence.	73%	82%	36%
	5) Regarding the body as a friend, a support for <i>sadhana</i> .	82%	100%	36%
	6) Not viewing the body and senses as sources of true joy or lasting happiness.*	82%	100%	64%
d	Changes in attitudes towards the world to:*			
	1) Detaching from the world as a source of true joy, lasting happiness, or love.*	100%	100%	45%
	2) Viewing the world as an arena for doing <i>sadhana</i> ***	100%	100%	73%
	3) Viewing the world as an arena for playing with and developing one's <i>shakti</i> .	73%	100%	27%
	4) Seeing the world as a play of the <i>shakti</i> , a divine sport.*	100%	100%	73%
	5) Regarding the world as a support for <i>sadhana</i> rather than something that's antagonistic towards <i>sadhana</i> .	91%	100%	45%
	6) Viewing the world as an embodiment of the <i>Guru</i> , always teaching one, always directing one towards the Self, always filled with grace."	91%	100%	36%
e	Changes in attitudes toward work to:			
	1) Detaching from work roles as defining who you are.	100%	100%	73%
	2) Transcending success and failure as determinants of who you are or how you feel about yourself; i.e., detaching from the results or the fruit of one's labor.*	100%	100%	55%
	3) Viewing one's work as <i>seva</i> .*	100%	100%	55%
	4) Regarding work as a means of burning off <i>karma</i> .*	82%	100%	27%
	5) Viewing work in the context of <i>sadhana</i> , as an arena for realizing the Self, work as a play of the Divine as well as a play of our delusions and learning to discriminate which is which.	91%	91%	64%
	6) Work as a field in which one can joyfully give expression to one's nature and one's <i>shakti</i> .	91%	91%	55%

**Table 5**  
(continued.)

Label	Description	Self Total n=11	Other Total n=11	Typical Total n=11
f	Changes in attitudes towards the mind to:			
	1) Detaching from the mind, witnessing the mind, practicing non-identification with the content of the mind.	100%	100%	73%
	2) Seeing the mind as a play of the <i>shakti</i> .*	100%	100%	73%
	3) Regarding the mind as a friend, as a great support for <i>sadhana</i> .	64%	100%	18%
	4) Also warily regarding the mind's ability to delude, bind, and contract one's consciousness.	91%	91%	55%
	5) Viewing the mind as something which must be controlled and disciplined albeit through love and perseverance in the practices.	91%	91%	64%
	6) Regarding the mind as a great tool for manifesting <i>shakti</i> on subtle and gross planes of existence.	73%	82%	36%
g	Changes in attitudes toward the <i>guru</i>	91%	91%	82%
h	Changes in attitudes towards relationships to:	82%	73%	64%
	1) Viewing relationship in the context of <i>sadhana</i> ; i.e., how do they affect one's state of mind or state of consciousness, do they support one's <i>sadhana</i> or not, is there <i>shakti</i> in the relationship, do some relationships make us more deluded and take us further from the <i>guru</i> and the Self, etc.	100%	100%	55%
	2) No longer looking to relationship to provide one with lasting joy, love or the meaning and fulfillment of one's life.*	100%	100%	36%
	3) Viewing relationships as the natural context for expressing love, creativity, or Self, rather than an external source in which one hopes to find love, creativity or Self.	82%	100%	36%
	4) Viewing relationships as the context for expanding our capacity to give and receive love.	64%	82%	27%
i	Change in attitude towards attitudes. Appreciating the importance of our attitudes in creating our own reality. We cultivate "right understanding" or "right attitudes" in order to change the nature of the reality we create for ourselves.**	100%	100%	82%
j	Change in attitudes towards pleasure and pain in general:	82%	82%	55%
	1) Seeking sense pleasures and avoiding pain are non-yogic, deluded; they are actions which create karma and sustain bondage.	55%	91%	27%
	2) Cultivation of an attitude of indifference or dispassion towards pleasure and pain is necessary.	100%	100%	36%
	3) Using experiences of pleasure and pain to learn discrimination, to see when one is stuck, contracted, identified with some limited aspects of one's being or at the mercy of undisciplined mental tendencies.	100%	100%	64%
	4) Witnessing pleasure and pain as part of the play of <i>shakti</i> on the gross plane of existence while not identifying with it.	91%	100%	27%
	5) Enjoying the pleasures of the senses in moderation and seeing them for what they are – limited; and seeing them for what they're not – a substitute for knowing and experiencing the Self.**	73%	82%	36%

**Table 5**  
(continued.)

Label	Description	Self Total n=11	Other Total n=11	Typical Total n=11
k	<b>Values and Priorities Changes</b>			
	Shifts away from the importance of material wealth, socio-economic status, power, fame and other ego needs.**	100%	100%	73%
	<i>Sadhana</i> , Self-realization, the <i>guru</i> -disciple relationship and one's state of consciousness or <i>shakti</i> [i.e., spiritual energy] level become the benchmarks against which the value, priority, or the effect of something is measured.**	100%	100%	64%
	Changes related to the goal of <i>sadhana</i> are more important, more highly valued than changes related to outer circumstances alone. In other words, changes in one's understanding, changes in one's state of consciousness, changes in one's <i>shakti</i> [i.e., spiritual energy] level changes that affect one's relationship to the <i>guru</i> or events related to one's relationship with the <i>guru</i> are more important than simple job changes, geographical moves, relational changes, etc. The latter often have meaning only in as much as they are related to <i>sadhana</i> , to being closer to the <i>guru</i> , etc.*	100%	100%	64%

Note: \* = most important for 1 person: 1 \*/person

commented, “[I learned to] view the body as a field – you can sow whatever seeds you want” and they also viewed “the body as a field of operations for samskaras (impressions and propensities rooted in past experience) to work themselves out.”

Changes in attitudes toward the world included detaching from the world as a source of true joy, lasting happiness and love, as well as viewing it as an arena for engaging in spiritual practices. The world was seen as a play of divine sport, meaning the unfolding of the boundless creativity of Consciousness, and as a place for developing one's own spiritual powers. Participants also reported seeing the world as an embodiment of the inner teacher, that is, always directing the student toward an awareness of the highest Self, and with events always filled with grace, when seen from the highest perspective. One long-term resident commented, “The world is as you see it,” quoting a tenet of Kashmir Shaivism.

Changes in attitude toward work, validated by 82-100% of participants, included detaching from work roles as defining one's identity, transcending success or failure at work as determinants of feelings of self-worth (i.e., letting go of attachment to the fruits of one's labor) (starred). Work was also viewed as selfless service (*seva*) (starred), or an important element in burning off *karma* (starred). Finally, work was seen as an arena for realizing one's true nature, and as a field in which to give full expression to one's own nature and creative energy (*shakti*).

All participants agreed that changes in attitudes toward relationships included viewing relationship in the context of spiritual practice (i.e., contemplating how relationships affect one's state of mind, and whether they have spiritual energy) and not expecting them to provide lasting joy, love or the fulfillment of one's life.

There were also clear shifts in attitudes toward pleasure and pain, with 100% of participants agreeing it was necessary to cultivate attitudes of indifference or dispassion toward pleasure and pain, using these experiences to learn discrimination. Long-term changes in values and priorities for 100% of participants, included observing a shift away from the ego driven importance of material wealth, socio-economic status, power, and fame (2 stars). Self-realization and maintaining a state of expanded awareness and higher consciousness became the benchmark against which the value of something was measured (2 stars). Interestingly, changes related to the goal of spiritual practices were more highly valued than simple employment, geographical or relational changes. All of these shifts were given stars, indicating their importance to the participants. One long-term resident commented, “but [I] also [learned that] acceptance of these things [material wealth, etc.] is okay, e.g., I have a much more positive feeling about money than I did before [practicing in this tradition].”

### **Relational Changes**

Table 6 includes interview points on long-term changes in a variety of relationships (Divinity, self, mind, body, others). General changes acknowledged by 91-100% of participants included experiencing Divinity within oneself and others, establishing a relationship with God or the Self that evolves from duality to unity, experiencing greater compassion for oneself and others, and being more accepting, caring and respecting of both the mind and body. Ninety-one percent felt they had also become more sensitive and caring towards both their immediate environment and the world environment.

Positive changes in relationships with parents were noted at the 91% level, including increased mutual respect, more love felt and expressed, and better communication. Householders noted that there was an “expansion of the parent/child relationship to also include a mutual respect on [a] person-to-person basis.” A long-term resident added that there was a “release of attachment, expectations and dependence.”

Positive changes in work relationships were also noted by 73-91% of the participants, including being more efficient/effective at work, experiencing more new ideas and creativity, getting along with co-workers/boss, and being more respectful and appreciative of the work of subordinates. Long-term residents noted, I am “more one-pointed,” and experience “less ego-ambition.” A monk also added, “[One may be] less apt to pursue a career which is not ultimately relevant to yogic ideals and aspirations.”

General comments by long-term residents were that improved relationships involved “letting go of judgments, criticisms, and ‘right and wrong’ games” and “greater detachment.” A monk stated that these long-term changes involved “people [being] more willing to look within to discover [the] root of relationship problems.”

It is important to note that in the categories of changing relationships with spouse, significant other, or children, the percentages in the ‘self’ category are very low. In



**Table 6**  
*Relational Changes*

Label	Description	Self Total n=11	Other Total n=11	Typical Total n=11
a	Development of <i>guru</i> -disciple relationship (see separate section)*	91%	91%	91%
b	More loving toward Self*	100%	100%	100%
c	Experiencing Divinity or God within oneself and others, establishing a connection, a relationship with God that evolves from duality to unity**	100%	100%	73%
d	Greater compassion toward oneself and others**	100%	100%	82%
e	More accepting, caring, respecting of one's mind	91%	82%	64%
f	More accepting, caring, respecting of one's body	91%	91%	64%
g	Improved relationship with one's parents. Improvements include:	91%	91%	64%
	1) Increased mutual respect	91%	91%	55%
	2) Greater independence from parental support	82%	91%	73%
	3) More real love felt and expressed	91%	91%	73%
	4) Better communication	91%	91%	64%
	5) Greater understanding and acceptance of differences in lifestyles and beliefs	82%	91%	45%
	6) Improvements come after periods of increased conflict during which issues brought to consciousness by the <i>shakti</i> are worked out and resolved.	36%	91%	27%
	7) Improvements come spontaneously as the <i>shakti</i> removes blocks, opens the heart, changes attitudes and behaviors within the individuals in the relationship	73%	82%	45%
h	Deterioration of relationship with parents	18%	64%	0
i	Improved relationship with spouse or significant other; improvements include:	45%	64%	18%
	1) More real love felt and expressed*	36%	82%	36%
	2) Increased mutual respect	27%	82%	27%
	3) Better communication	27%	82%	27%
	4) Less conflict	27%	82%	27%
	5) More support of each other's independent growth	36%	82%	27%
	6) Improved sexual relations	27%	64%	18%
	7) Greater commitment to each other	27%	73%	18%
	8) More frequent and varied ways of expressing love and care for one another	27%	82%	36%
	9) More willing to do things for one another	27%	73%	18%
	10) More willing to compromise and go along with the other's wishes or preferences	27%	64%	18%
	11) Improvements come after periods of increased conflict during which issues brought to consciousness by the <i>shakti</i> are worked out and resolved	27%	64%	18%
	12) Improvements come spontaneously as the <i>shakti</i> removes blocks, opens the heart, changes attitudes and behaviors within the individuals and the relationship	27%	73%	27%
j	Deterioration of relationship with spouse to the point where the relationship is terminated through divorce or separation	18%	64%	27%
	1) Issues brought up by the <i>shakti</i> were unresolvable within the relationship	9%	73%	45%
	2) There was <i>shakti</i> or grace behind the end of the relationship; it was the "right" thing to happen	9%	73%	36%

**Table 6**  
(continued.)

Label	Description	Self Total n=11	Other Total n=11	Typical Total n=11
k	Improved relationships with one's children. Improvements include:	18%	64%	27%
	1) Greater love	9%	73%	45%
	2) More mutual respect for each other's individuality	9%	73%	36%
	3) Less conflict	18%	64%	36%
	4) Better communication	18%	73%	45%
	5) More shared activities, e.g., meditation, chanting, attending ashram programs, etc.	18%	73%	45%
	6) Greater ability to be light and playful with one another	18%	73%	18%
l	Improved work relationships	73%	73%	64%
	1) More efficient and effective at work	91%	91%	73%
	2) More new ideas and greater creativity at work	82%	82%	64%
	3) Get along with co-workers better*	91%	91%	64%
	4) Get along with boss or authorities better	91%	91%	73%
	5) Show more appreciation for other people's work	82%	82%	64%
	6) More respectful and appreciative of the work of those in subordinate positions	73%	82%	55%
m	More sensitive about and caring towards one's environment, both the immediate environment and the world environment. This means maintaining a pure environment as well as cultivating an uplifting emotional and spiritual climate around oneself.	91%	100%	55%

Note: \* = most important for 1 person: 1 \*/person

most cases three of four householders and in a few cases four of four householders reported experiencing improvements in relationships to spouse, while for the most part zero long-term residents and zero monks did. This simply reflects that all householders were married or seriously involved with someone, while three of four long-term ashram residents were unmarried. The one long-term resident who was married said she and her spouse had been involved in the tradition when they met so she could not separate out what might have improved as a result of the tradition. The monks were, of course, not married or involved with anyone.

### Physical Changes

Table 7 shows the responses of participants regarding long-term physical changes. These responses were more varied than other categories. All participants noted long-term dietary changes toward a lacto-vegetarian diet; however, one ashram resident commented, "dietary changes, though they seem universal will vary considerably as to the individual and whether living in society with family and friends or in an ashram." Also, 91% felt they had increased energy and sharper sensitivity to physical stimuli (visual, auditory, touch, taste, etc.).

However, other categories showed wide variation. Interestingly, 82% noted having physical *kriyas* (movements of the awakened energy within their body, often manifesting as spontaneous movements of the arms, the head, or changes in breathing rhythms, considered part of the purification process, as the energy clears away blocks to spiritual progress and enlightenment). They also noted better

**Table 7**  
*Physical Changes*

Label	Description	Self Total n=11	Other Total n=11	Typical Total n=11
a	Dietary changes toward and including lacto-vegetarian diet*	100%	100%	100%
b	Decreased need for sleep.*	55%	91%	18%
c	Increased energy	91%	91%	55%
d	Weight loss	36%	73%	18%
e	Weight gain	18%	73%	18%
f	Generally improved health	55%	64%	27%
g	Healing of specific diseases and health problems	45%	91%	27%
h	Better resistance to and more rapid recovery from common ailments like colds, flu, sore throats, etc.	45%	55%	27%
i	<i>Kriyas</i> *	82%	100%	82%
j	Better posture	82%	55%	27%
k	Looser joints	82%	73%	45%
l	Deeper freer breathing	73%	73%	45%
m	Sharper senses, more sensitive to various physical stimuli – tastes, odors, touch, sounds, lights, colors	91%	82%	64%
n	Process of physical purification in which the body spontaneously goes through a variety of experiences brought about by the <i>shakti</i> (see separate heading of “purification process”)	73%	100%	64%

Note: \* = most important for 1 person: 1 \*/person

posture and looser joints. Better posture and looser joints could also be associated with the practice of *hatha yoga* (the practice of physical postures and breathing techniques more familiar to westerners), which was also available in ashram classes on a regular basis and practiced individually by many.

About half of the participants stated they had generally improved health, the healing of specific health problems and better resistance to and faster recovery from common ailments. One long-term resident commented regarding improved health, that “also many people move away from the use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs.” Monks wrote that they noted individuals had “brighter and easier-going physical looks and “less wrinkles, [i.e.], youthfulness.” Seventy-three per cent (73%) noted deeper freer breathing, possibly due to the practices of chanting, *hatha yoga*, and *pranayama* (the regulation of breath through techniques, exercises and spontaneous *kriyas*) during meditation. One long-term resident commented that breathing was more nuanced, “sometimes slower, very shallow and slow, [and] sometimes more space between the breaths.”

## Discussion

The intent of this study was to achieve an in-depth understanding of psychological change and spiritual growth as experienced by individuals practicing a single *kundalini* based yogic path, and to do so with as little distortion as possible from western psychological, reductionistic or other biases. The main question addressed was, after receiving initiation (*shaktipat*), and the awakening of the *kundalini*

energy, what types of long-term change do students of this TKY experience, after 10 or more years of practice?

We believe this research makes a unique contribution to the field of transpersonal psychology through (a) its use of a homogeneous group (students of spirituality within one path, as not all yogic traditions are alike and mixing traditions may give skewed or inaccurate result, (b) its aim to use the first-person perspective in its methodology, so that the perspective of the individuals being studied would be authentically communicated within the research paradigm. [To accomplish this feat, an ethnographic approach was used, which is designed to bring out salient features of a given milieu, and, through participant validation, to express them in the native terms of that milieu. This is essential for understanding this culture (a global Hindu-based community, with members residing in the U.S.)], and (c) the inclusion of both householders and long-term ashram residents, including monks, to compare the long-term effects of different levels of immersion in these spiritual practices.

The study reported 169 types of life changes within seven categories. Examining the results from the seven categories one sees how far-reaching the transformation of participants was within this tradition. As noted in the introduction, the aim of yoga and other consciousness disciplines is typically to dissolve the boundaries of consciousness defined by the ego and the body, thus enabling one to know one's self as universal, all-encompassing Consciousness. The reported changes confirmed transformation toward this goal and touched virtually every aspect of human existence - the body, mind, emotions, concepts, priorities, relationships, work, and relation to the environment.

One prominent feature across all seven categories was that the three groups were similar in their responses, e.g., there were no group differences. This suggests that disciples of this path perceived the same long-term effects whether they were householders, participating in regular activities of daily life with a career, family, etc., or ashram residents who were immersed full time in spiritual practices. The only exception to this was in the category of relationships, in which numbers were relatively low for improvements regarding relationships to children and spouse. This can be explained as most long-term ashram residents, as well as the monks, were single, and thus they did not validate these statements.

Interestingly, for most categories, participants felt confident in applying statements to themselves and others known to them but were reluctant to generalize the statement to other students within the path. This spiritual path emphasizes the authenticity of the first-person experience; i.e., in this tradition there is a tacit assumption that each individual's experience is right for them. It is also possible that there was a reluctance to label changes as typical (that is as experienced by all students of the tradition), as not all students had the same dedication to the discipline of the path.

Among the many categories and types of long-term transformation that the participants described, one that stood out as especially noteworthy was a decrease in the importance of achieving external goals in the world just for the sake of

achievement, and an increased importance of spiritual goals (maintaining more expanded states even while working in the world). This was true for people who lived in the Ashram (which would be expected) but was also true for householders who were living and working in the world.

Part of this transformation involved shifting attitudes related to negative experiences and reframing them as opportunities for growth. This included the ability to detach from what participants termed an “ego-oriented,” that is, a self-referential attached perspective, and develop detachment leading to witness consciousness (ultimately the state of the Self). In doing this they were also able to reframe the initially perceived ‘negative experience’ as an opportunity for growth and return to a state of equanimity.

In addition, those interviewed described going through a shift from ego-based self-referential thinking when they began following the path toward unity awareness and connection, which they described as resulting in an increased awareness and concern for others. An aspect of this shift involved the process of learning to practice surrender, specifically surrendering the ego’s need to control life in a self-referential way. Thus, surrender may be seen as a synonym for acceptance of life no matter how it manifests.

Another fascinating aspect of transformation documented was the ability to accept paradox. For example, when participants discussed their shifts in how they viewed or related to God they reported now being able to relate to God both dualistically (e.g., as an ‘other’ during prayer and worship) and in unity, as one’s own Self (e.g., merging in God, unity Consciousness). This observation was also reflected in their attitudes toward a career, in that material wealth and fame were no longer valued as ends in themselves, but the workplace was nevertheless seen as important for practicing maintaining the highest goals of spiritual practice, including respecting oneself and others.

The data also indicate that the range of positive long-term mental changes experienced by the group is exceptional, including, a quieter mind, development of witness consciousness, increased intuition, creativity, inspiration, and being better able to translate thoughts and ideas into actions and reality. These were accompanied by emotional changes such as a more expanded experience of love, from ego-oriented to unconditional love, greater acceptance of self and others, more positive emotions, and decreases in the strength of fears and anxieties. Physical changes included sharper senses and more sensitivity to sensory stimuli (91%), along with generally improved health (55%).<sup>5</sup>

The yogic literature<sup>6</sup> emphasizes the importance of expansion and transformation of consciousness as the outcome of spiritual awakening and the long-term application of yoga practices. In this study, expansion and transformation were reflected in changes in concepts, values and priorities. One summary statement represents these changes well: “spiritual practices (*sadhana*), self-realization, the teacher-student (*guru-disciple*) relationship and one’s state of consciousness or energy (*shakti*) level [have] become the benchmarks against which the value, priority, or the effect of something is measured.” This is a shift in values away from

those that are typical of a culture based on a materialist perspective toward focusing on inner spiritual values.

One aspect of the TKY cultural influences on this study is reflected in the language used by participants to describe transformative changes. Some statements may be seen as ambiguous, or challenging to understand, as they use language from within their community of the day, such as “emotional blocks brought up...and then gotten rid of by the *shakti*.” As noted in the Introduction section, spiritual awakening is believed to initiate a transformational process driven by the *kundalini shakti* and the long-term application of yoga practices. Thus, in this tradition the *shakti* is understood to be an active agent propelling the transformation process. However, the participants in these interviews typically did not emphasize the aspect of an individual’s self-effort in propelling the process forward because their focus was on the power of *shakti*, grace unfolding, which is given importance in this TKY.

The changes found in this study are similar to those noted in a study of *kundalini* awakenings in the general population, which also examined long-term changes in mental, emotional, physical health, attitudes and values (Woollacott et al., 2021). Similarities included a large percentage of individuals who experienced an increase in creativity (over 60%), increased sensory sensitivity (35-60%), improved overall health (50%), increased love and affection for family (over 60%), an increased desire to serve others (80%), and increased feelings of unity with all humanity (80%). They also experienced an increased belief in the immortality of the spirit (over 60%) and decreases in materialist goals (60%).

In comparing the results of this study to previous studies examining changes in specific spiritual traditions (Glick, 1983; Hendriks et al., 2021; Suresh et al., 2013; Wilcox, 1984; Wilson, 1982) the categories of change basically subsume and go beyond those reported previously. When comparing results with those of Glick’s study (of the *kundalini yoga* tradition of Amrit Desai), his categories of change were not adequate to describe the full range of changes experienced by students of the tradition examined in this study. Although Glick (1983) noted that participants consistently described the unique nature of *kundalini*, the model he proposed for describing the change process never mentioned it. This absence seems to reflect the paradigm clash between his own theoretical biases and the yoga paradigm he was studying. Though Glick noted that he was studying from a western psychological perspective, a criticism could be made that any insights from the study reflect a bias towards this perspective rather than that of a tantric yoga tradition that included the concept of *kundalini*.

The approach of Glick is somewhat similar to that of Suresh et al. (2013), and Hendriks et al. (2021), who studied the effects of yogic training in two additional TKAs using psychological inventories.<sup>7</sup> Results showed significant improvements in character strengths and psychological and emotional well-being; however, results were not discussed within the framework of the goals described above, of the TKAs.

In summary, the current study has extended the results of previous studies, with these results indicating the far-reaching effects of long-term spiritual transformation in students of this tradition. These changes touch virtually every aspect of human existence, including, values, priorities, the body, mind, relationships, work and one's relation to the environment. Changes included an expanded self-concept, moving from a limited self, identified with the mind and body, to a universal Self of infinite extent, as well as increased experience of higher states of consciousness. Simultaneously, the study optimized methodology for examining this research question by (a) limiting the analysis to a specific tradition, in order not to distort results by mixing traditions, (b) employing concepts of yoga rather than reductive psychology within the analysis, and (c) using an ethnographic method, to better ensure that the results were free of researcher bias.

### Limitations

The primary limitation of the study is that the description of yoga practices (*sadhana*) in this study is directly applicable only to this tradition. Though it is consistent with the classic literature on yoga (Edwards, 1987) and shares many characteristics with other yoga traditions, this study was designed to inform the reader of the perspective of a dedicated student of this tradition and experience of *kundalini*-based yogic practices. In addition, this study has emphasized the long-term effects of *kundalini* awakening and unfolding within a comprehensive TKY context where all the various practices, including meditation, study, selfless service, mantra, chanting, etc. are viewed as imbued with *shakti* and thus contribute to the deepening of transformation. This study did not attempt to delineate different effects from different practices, in part because *shakti* was viewed as the underlying power for all of them. Another limitation is that the study intentionally reflects the perspective of committed students who have been practicing for 10 or more years. It is likely that persons who had been practicing for a shorter period would have had more diverse views. It could also be considered a limitation that a small number of participants ( $n = 13$ ), were interviewed compared to the global nature of the spiritual path. Alternatively, however, the intense interview methodology used can be considered a major strength in that it gives great exploratory depth and is similar to that used in other studies of this kind. The thousands of hours required by this extensive in-depth interview methodology, however, does not allow for a broad sample. Finally, the interview data are from 1985-86 and express the views of these informants at that time.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Within this tradition, the term *shakti* has many levels of meaning and usages. For example, it is considered to be the divine power that creates and maintains the universe, as well as the innate power to know oneself, which, when awakened, guides spiritual transformation. Transformation is described as a purification process, as kundalini moves through the physical and subtle bodies removing blocks to knowing one's Self. The spontaneous movements of kundalini are termed *kriyas*. As this energy moves toward the crown center, the *sahasrara*, it chooses the course of expansion that will free the individual (Brooks & Bailly, 1997). Thus, a practitioner might use the term "emotional blocks were brought up...and then gotten rid of by the *shakti*" or the practice helps "develop one's *shakti*," as ways of describing the transformation process.

<sup>2</sup> When the term yoga practices is used, it is not referring only to postural practices, like hatha yoga, but also includes, for example, meditation, chanting, mantra repetition, scriptural study, selfless service.

<sup>3</sup> The authors, in addition to being yogic practitioners, have degrees in psychology (PhD) and neuroscience (PhD)/ Asian Studies (MA), respectively. They have written both books and scholarly publications in the area of yoga philosophy, psychology/neuroscience, and meditation. The research was originally guided by a psychology professor who was methodologically informed, and the two authors are well versed in theories/methods of both psychology, yogic philosophy, and neuroscience.

<sup>4</sup> This gap between the interviews and the write up of the research occurred because the first author shifted his career focus to that of a clinical psychologist. The recent collaborative effort created an environment for writing up the results for publication. We do not believe that this gap in time would significantly affect the results, beyond perhaps changing the vocabulary style that was used to describe the participants' transformative experiences.

<sup>5</sup> Though these positive changes were reported within the group interviewed, it should be acknowledged that within the broader context of *kundalini* awakenings globally, negative experiences have also been reported and have been discussed by other researchers (Edwards 2013; Grof & Grof, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> For example, *Tantraloka* [Light on the Tantra] and the *Pratyabhijnahridayam* [Doctrine of Recognition] (Singh, 2015; Wallis, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> For example, *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the *State and Trait Anxiety Inventory* (Spielberger et al., 1970).

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