

INTRODUCING *Kundalini yoga*

Kundalini yoga is a powerful and uplifting yogic practice which can help reduce anxiety and stress - even change your life
writes Carolyn Cowan

WHILE I WAS photographing nomads in the Gujurati desert in 1995, I met my first Kundalini teacher. Guru Kaur and her husband climbed into the truck that was carrying me and a bunch of nomads off to the Rann of Kutch. I had not seen a white-skinned person for several months and was surprised when I heard that she was a stockbroker and he worked as a secret policeman. But the stockbroker also taught yoga. And when I returned to London I started a Kundalini class with her at 6.30am on a Saturday morning and was gradually seduced by a practice which, at first, I hated!

It soon became part of my daily ritual, and I have been teaching since 1998. I can honestly say that my experience of playing with the Kundalini continues to expand beyond my expectations.

Kundalini refers to a form of primal energy said to be located at the base of the spine. In Hindu tradition, Bhairavi is the goddess of Kundalini. There are many styles of Kundalini yoga; I was initiated into the 'as taught by Yogi Bhajan' style which has its roots in Sikhism. Yogi Bhajan was a powerful figure, charismatic, strong and held a wonderful authority. It was a pleasure to be in his trainings and classes and I gained a very real sense of the potency inherent in this practice. He created a massive global following which continues to expand to this day.

A class is generally an uplifting blend of spiritual and physical practices. Kundalini yoga incorporates movement, dynamic breathing techniques, meditation, and the chanting of mantras. The goal is to build physical vitality and increase consciousness, awareness and to enable the practitioner to expand their deepest sense of themselves. ➤



PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK

'Kundalini works really well for those with addictive natures, anxiety sufferers, people working through trauma, healing anger and low self-esteem'

Kundalini yoga differs from most other practices in that it allows you to literally play with intention. Our intention is profound and potent. It is quantum physics made manifest and when we actively engage with the power of our intention, we can create personal change. By contrast, if we are not consciously and actively engaged in the power of our intention we are constantly inviting the energy to follow our negative and highly repetitive anxious thought patterns: I am tired, I can't do this, I am lonely, etc.

The way in which Kundalini is taught makes it wonderfully potent. We are invited and supported to transform, to work towards our better or ideal version of yourself. It can enable you to mature out of childish emotional patterns into a clearer and more adult version of yourself. The postures, mantras and meditations all support this, and progress can be fast in terms of strengthening the self, the nervous system and holding the mentalisation, or visualising the intentions.

This yoga style works really well for those with addictive natures, anxiety sufferers, working through trauma, healing anger and low self-esteem issues. Personally, I have also found it very helpful when working with the huge range of issues that rise in menopause.

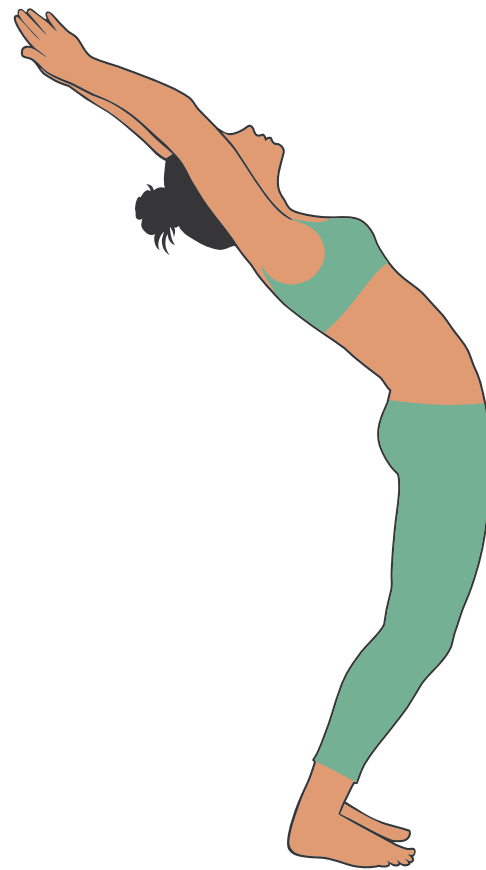
Each teacher works with the Kundalini energy differently. We are all invited to bring ourselves into the teaching process and therefore every class has its own flavour. Some teachers are manifestly Sikh, follow these teachings and view the energy through this lens. Others of us take a wider perspective and hold space where the individual can find their own internal connections and 'spiritual practice'.

Over the past 25 years, I have seen continuous change, evolution, transformation and growth, within myself and around me. This is what holds me to the path. There are certain postures, breaths, meditations and concepts which have become essential, life-enhancing, pivotal and without which I would not hold myself so well in these swirling and chaotic times.

We have several postures in this discipline which really do create instantaneous shifts in the body energy. I show a few here that work on the vagus nerve, the fascia and are also grounding and heart-opening. Try any of these postures for three minutes a day for 40 days and see how they create transformation over the weeks, alongside their ability to effect immediate resetting of the internal sense of self.

It is best to wear loose comfortable clothes, and to actively decide to tune into yourself before starting. Traditionally we use a mantra 'ong namo guru dev namo', (I bow to the Divine within), repeated three times. I always feel that postures are more potent when done with the eyes closed, moving slowly, inhaling when the lungs are stretched and exhaling when compressed.

Carolyn Cowan is a yoga teacher and counsellor specialising in anxiety, trauma and addiction



MIRACLE BENDS

Called so because of their transformational nature.

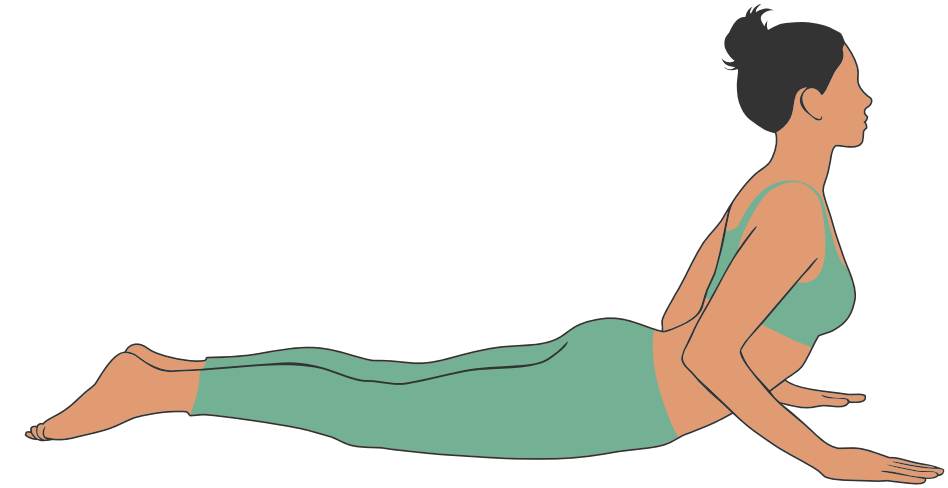
Stand with feet comfortably apart. Inhale and raise arms high up above the head, slightly leaning back, chin raised. And exhale arms down, hands past your now bent knees, and continue, inhaling up and down.

This posture, on the inhale, opens the heart energy, expands the lungs, stretches the vagus nerve and the fascial bridges.

On the exhale it stretches the spinal nervous system and compresses the internal organs, relaxing them and stimulating the flow of positive, feel-good hormones.

It is also said to expand the electro-magnetic field. Excellent when you feel flat, low or stressed.

ILLUSTRATIONS: SHUTTERSTOCK



COBRA

Lying on the stomach, if not very flexible, hands in front of your shoulders; if feeling soft and fluid, hands under the shoulders. Eyes closed, inhale up keeping the shoulders down and the elbows soft, stretch the chin up. Exhale down. Continue for two minutes.

This posture is profoundly relaxing for the fascia, it stretches the vagus nerve, releases contraction around the heart and lowers anxiety. Lie still after and be soft. Let your body experience itself in a relaxed state. Try doing this in bed if you cannot sleep.



SUFI GRIND

Very sensual, hypnotic, when done slowly and with a deep intention to allow the belly button to explore a hemispherical voyage around the equator of your torso.

To start, sit cross legged, hands over your knees. With your eyes closed, pull your chest forward and raise your chin as you inhale.

From here begin to allow the spine to move to one side as you allow yourself to tip onto the back of your pelvis into a deep slouch. Continue the journey round until you are again inhaling and pulling over the chest and the neck.

Practise it over three minutes: one minute

one way, change direction for another minute then 30 seconds each way. This posture massages the internal organs and releases serotonin into the body. Sit with eyes closed breathing gently when finished, allowing the brain to gather the serotonin. The sensation is one of utter stillness.