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Letter to the editor

Kundalini yoga and kundalini awakenings

Dear Editor,

We have read with interest the recent paper published in this journal entitled "Kundalini-like experience as psychopathology: A case series and brief review" by Suchandra et al. [1]. This case series study provides a useful contribution to the field of research evaluating the occurrence of what have been called kundalini awakenings (KA's), awakening experiences, spiritual emergencies and the physio-kundalini syndrome. It highlights a well-known characteristic of these phenomena, which is that some of these events have symptoms that overlap significantly with psychotic episodes. It is therefore important to determine whether these events are either welcomed spiritual experiences, or disturbing psychopathological states associated with a psychotic condition that warrants appropriate clinical treatment [2].

There is mounting credible research evidence that contemplative practices such as yoga and meditation increase spiritual experiences that have many similar characteristics to the mystical/unitive/transcendental state of consciousness, which is the ultimate intent of many of these practices. It has therefore been assumed that contemplative practices may facilitate KA's, an assumption apparently supported by case reports of KA's following contemplative practices. However, the spontaneous occurrence of KA's is well known and in many cases precipitated by life events such as near-death experiences and the use of psychotropic drugs such as hallucinogens. Furthermore, there is not yet significant evidence to date to confirm the contention that contemplative practices do in fact generate KA's at a frequency/prevalence higher than that in the general population that is not engaged in such practices [2]. Although we appreciate and concur with the caution expressed in this paper regarding highly intensive contemplative practices, especially with individuals that may be prone to psychosis, this lack of evidence should also have been acknowledged. This is our first, although minor, concern with this paper.

Our most serious concern is with the casual application of the term "kundalini yoga". As noted in the paper, there are a number of spiritual texts and scholarly writings referring to the practice of kundalini yoga, which has frequently and questionably been referred to as a practice that may precipitate KA's that are dangerous to the practitioners. In fact, this impression of kundalini yoga has reached widespread folklore status within India as well as in the yoga community internationally. However, the definition of what is involved in these discussions of kundalini yoga practices is vague at best. In the paper, the authors describe "physical movements, Hatha-yoga postures, concentrated breathing meditations, chanting of certain sounds and evocative words, meditation upon visual images and focusing on the seven energy centers to awaken and elevate the energy from the spine to head". However, there is nothing unique in this content, and these practices are common to many traditional and spiritually oriented styles of yoga practice. The spiritual texts and scholarly writings on kundalini yoga are often not any more specific. Presumably, the authors focused on kundalini yoga because of this reputation of kundalini yoga and/or because the patients in this study all claimed to practice it. However, we suggest it would have been much more appropriate for the authors to have made reference to caution with regards to "all highly intensive forms of contemplative practice with an intent for KA's", rather than specifically to kundalini yoga in general.

The most popular school of kundalini yoga internationally is Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan (KY-YB), which is taught and promoted through the 3HO Foundation, the Kundalini Research Institute, the International Kundalini Yoga Teachers Association, and the Guru Ram Das Center for Medicine and Humanology. The KY-YB style is one of the major styles of yoga and has large and growing numbers of practitioners mostly in North and South America, Europe and China; the global community of teachers is more than 28,000 strong in over 52 countries and over 3,000 teachers graduate from teacher training programs annually. It is also the style that has been evaluated in the majority of research publications on kundalini yoga. Although it is a contemplatively oriented style, the emphasis is strictly on gradual spiritual and psychological development. The idea of sudden and immediate KA is actively discouraged as an intent in KY-YB. Furthermore, this style of yoga is a safe practice that is fully appropriate for all populations, regardless of age, gender and/or physical or psychological limitations, and care is always taken by instructors to teach in a safe manner appropriate for the limitations of students, especially beginners. In fact, relative to the other major yoga styles, this particular style of practice has been shown to be one of the safest form of practices [3].

We recognize that KY-YB is not the only school/style of yoga referred to as kundalini yoga. The intent and content of the practices in these other styles may vary widely; it is not specified which style was used by the patients in the case studies in the Suchandra etl al. paper [1]. The authors have clearly not made the effort to recognize the distinction between these different styles and have referred to kundalini yoga generally as an "advanced practice" and have made the problematic statement that "Kundalini yoga is considered as the most powerful but high-risk form of yoga". Their citation of 4 papers on KY-YB (two by three cosigners and the author of this letter [4,5]) as examples of research on kundalini yoga further affirms that they have not distinguished between the different kundalini yoga schools and therefore have not accurately defined this term. They make the assertion that the kundalini yoga research studies are somehow safer because "the interventions were modified to suit the condition of the patient by experts in the field of Kundalini Yoga". While some of the KY-YB studies used a limited number of simple practices, a number of KY-YB studies have actually applied KY-YB practices in a manner similar to what would be taught to beginners in the general population, without report of any adverse events [5–8]. This is despite the fact that many of the KY-YB research studies have been conducted in novice, vulnerable patient

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populations with psychological impairments across a wide range of ages [4–8].

We regret that in inaccurate use of the term kundalini yoga, this paper has erroneously characterized KY-YB as an "advanced practice", which is promoting the impression that this practice should not be considered to be appropriate for beginners. We believe that this has caused unnecessary doubt, confusion and even fear with respect to the solid reputation of KY-YB as a safe and valuable form of yoga that can be practiced by beginners in the general population seeking a safe wellness practice that can be adapted appropriately and safely to anyone regardless of limitations.[1]

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