# TRAUMA TO DHARMA: THE JOURNEY HOME
# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PRACTICE OF KUNDALINI YOGA AS TAUGHT BY YOGI BHAJAN

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Trauma to Dharma: The Journey Home

A Phenomenological Study of the Practice of

Kundalini Yoga and Meditation as taught by Yogi Bhajan

by

Azita Esther Nahai

## Abstract

This phenomenological study highlights the importance of the use of the spiritual somatic practice of Kundalini Yoga in actively and consciously healing our bodies, clearing our minds, and reconnecting us to our spirits, thereby empowering ourselves to transform our lives. The particular focus was a mindful inquiry that explored the lived outcomes of participants' experience of healing trauma through Kundalini Yoga.

The research context included a review of literature on the impact of trauma on survivors, including neurobiological and psychosocial effects. I also reviewed studies on the use of somatic and mindfulness methods for treating trauma, as well as studies related to somatics, yoga, and phenomenology. For further contextualization I reviewed the different types of yoga, and presented a description of the history and practice of Kundalini Yoga.

Twelve Kundalini Yoga practitioners in the greater Los Angeles area, who claimed they experienced healing of personal trauma through their yoga practice, were interviewed in order to uncover the answer to the research question: *What are the lived outcomes experienced by practitioners who claim healing of personal trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga?*

Their embodied descriptions were analyzed using Edmund Husserl's eidetic

method to reveal the essences of life in the aftermath of trauma and life after having experienced healing through the practice of Kundalini Yoga. Data gathered through in-depth interviewing served to clarify and illuminate what is described in prior research as symptoms such as poor body awareness; difficulty feeling, identifying, and regulating emotions; negative self-perceptions; difficulty connecting to both internal and external experiences; experiencing uncertainty, as well as lack of meaning and purpose in their lives.

The central emergent concept was "awareness" as expressed through six themes: (a) acceptance, (b) agency, (c) authority, (d) allowing, (e) appreciation, and (f) authenticity. Without awareness, there was no growth, healing, or transformation. The findings suggested that daily practice of Kundalini Yoga not only provides healing in mind, body, and spirit for trauma survivors, but is also a growth-fostering intervention.

My research supports the call for including body and spirituality in healing practice in order to foster post-traumatic growth, a conception present in prior research. In addition, the results resonate with Maslow's qualities of self-actualization.

**Key words:** yoga; Kundalini yoga; awareness; posttrautmatic thriving; awareness; trauma healing; acceptance; agency; authority; allowing; appreciation; authenticity; transformation; mind, body, and spirit healing, mind-body-spirit healing.

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> We don't accomplish anything in this world alone… and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads that form one to another to create something. Sandra Day O'Connor (as cited in Biskupic, 2006, p. 7)

Yes, I have created some "thing." But as any phenomenologist knows, once you have committed to "return to the things themselves" you set off to uncover the essential features that make the thing what it is, and without which it could not be (Husserl, 1997; van Manen, 1997). This phenomenon of a dissertation would not be what it is without its essential pieces.

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growth, to life, and to service inspires me. I feel so blessed to have been touched by such kindred spirits, such sage warriors in my life.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my four enlightened teachers:

Mom and Dad

and

Guru Singh and Guruperkarma Kaur

I awaken every morning to one blessed certainty: I would not be standing here today—healed, transformed, and liberated—without you. Thank you for faithfully carrying me through this liberating journey in those pressing moments when I struggled to carry myself. Thank you for leading me from "where I was" to "who I am."

Love you.

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Purpose, Background, and Significance of Research

### My Trauma Recovery: The Missing Piece Leading to Research Question

> If you cannot find it in your own body, where will you go in search of it?
>
> (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002, p. 21)

I am a domestic abuse survivor. I was entangled in the throes of an abusive relationship for most of my 20s. I was lucky. I broke free. Many don't. I was doubly lucky. I not only broke free of his immobilizing, abusive grip, but was offered effective healing tools to break free from the debilitating psychological trauma that ensued. And with these tools came a gift, for not only did I actively take part in healing my trauma, but I also experienced my healing as an empowering catalyst to transform my life.

I spent the first 2 ½ months of my trauma recovery in two different in-patient trauma treatment centers. During that time and the years to follow I ran the gamut of healing modalities: from bi-weekly psychotherapy sessions, support groups, and fellowships in 12-step programs to EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) trauma treatment and psychodrama. Yes, I committed to a wide range of intensive therapies to work through my trauma, and they all played an effective role in my trauma recovery, by requiring me to delve into the workings of my mind. However, within these different layers of therapeutic approaches, there was a missing piece. What about my body? I had neglected to involve my body. Both treatment center programs and recommended recovery plans lacked any kind of required somatic approach to healing.

It wasn't until I stepped into my local yoga studio and committed to my daily Kundalini Yoga and Meditation practice, as taught by Yogi Bhajan, that I discovered that missing somatic piece of my recovery. After close to 7 years in recovery, it took diving into these yogic and meditative waters to access the remaining traumatic pain I was carrying. As I committedly and effectively began to heal my Self through this human vessel of cells, nerves, and organs, I couldn't help but wonder at what point do we need to get out of our minds and into our bodies in order to reclaim our selves, while amidst the consequential chaos of our trauma?

Once I was willing to surrender to my body as a means to access my psychological and emotional pain, I instantly felt the intensity and heaviness of the traumatic residue I had been carrying. This embodied practice guided me to reconnect to every part of my being. Through each committed month after month, breath after breath, and pose after pose, I experienced those stale, weighted pieces of trauma start to dislodge from my body, my mind, and my spirit. I had actively and consciously taken part in healing them and letting them go. I had become an active participant in my own healing, and in turn felt awakened and empowered to transform my life, starting with becoming a certified Kundalini Yoga teacher. I learned to incorporate the practical principles of this technology off the yoga mat and into my everyday life. This practice has supported me along my journey from trauma to dharma where I now experience my life actively and purposefully. So, it is no surprise that this ancient yogic technology I am now living, breathing, teaching, and experiencing has found its way into the heart of my research. I have lived and witnessed the benefits of this practice.

## Research Question

Through the years as teacher and practitioner I have been heartened and inspired by this yogic technology and its healing and transformative effects as experienced within my Self, and witnessed through the journey of my students and fellow practitioners alike. This practice has offered me a safe and supportive space to journey inward and outward, a place to turn down the noise of past trauma and come to quiet, by breathing and moving into the moment and into a state of expanded awareness. With every sequence of breath, posture, mudra, and mantra, I awakened to the present moment where I recognized my ability to take charge of my healing and take back my life. As a healed abuse survivor and yoga teacher, I know I have a responsibility to share my experience and share and teach the practice that healed and transformed me and so many others. If Kundalini Yoga has aided in healing and transforming others as it has me, I wanted to know about it. That confirming knowledge would only further support my mission to guide my students on their paths of personal healing and transformation and validate the potential benefits of the practice of Kundalini Yoga.

My enthusiasm and responsibility grew into curiosity as I stepped into the phenomenological wonder and musing of the depth of human experience. How did others experience healing trauma through this yogic practice? Did they experience changes in themselves and in their lives? Thus, the research question became this: *What are the lived outcomes experienced by practitioners who claim healing of personal trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga?* My personal experience and the questions that arose out of my transformation are what have driven this mindful inquiry.

This mindful inquiry grew into a phenomenological study that examined and explored the lived outcomes of participants' experience of healing trauma through Kundalini Yoga. Twelve Kundalini Yoga practitioners in the greater Los Angeles area, who claimed they experienced healing of personal trauma through their yoga practice, were interviewed in order to uncover the answer to the research question. Their embodied descriptions of their lived experience of having healed through the practice were transcribed and analyzed using Edmund Husserl's eidetic method to reveal the essences of life in the aftermath of trauma and life after having experienced healing through the practice of Kundalini Yoga.

One's life traumas and crises can be that catalyst to initiate one's journey to self-actualization. Kundalini Yoga is one modality that can be applied towards healing our heavy-coated layers of trauma. Healing these layers of traumatic pain enables the practitioner to reconnect, to be in union, "in yoga" with his or her Infinite self and consciousness: to be in dharma. My purpose with this study is to highlight the importance of the use of this spiritual somatic practice in actively and consciously healing our bodies, clearing our minds, and reconnecting us to our spirits, thereby empowering ourselves to transform our lives. In my experience, Kundalini Yoga and Meditation is a supportive healing modality in trauma recovery and a life toolset for post-traumatic personal growth and transformation.

## What is Kundalini Yoga?

> Kundalini Yoga builds inner strength and awareness, so you can fulfill your highest potential. (Yogi Bhajan, 2003)

By definition, yoga is a way of life that was physiologically and scientifically developed over three thousand years ago in order to integrate the mind and body so as to achieve higher levels of growth and consciousness (Bhajan, 2003; Desikachar, 1999). In yogic philosophy, it is understood and used as a tool to reach heightened states of liberation and consciousness, and it is a systematized practice that may be utilized in order to understand our beliefs and feelings, with an emphasis on overcoming our limitations around them (Bhajan, 2003; Chapple, 2008; Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002; Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2007). It can be said that yoga is a tool to cultivate understanding leading to self-mastery.

*Yoga* is *yoke* in Sanskrit, which means to join together, or unite. Therefore, the practice of yoga has been defined as a mechanism to unite one's personal consciousness with infinite consciousness, thereby creating a sense of awareness with all that resides within oneself and the exterior world (Bhajan, 2003; Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002). Kundalini Yoga, specifically, is a branch of yoga that is said to be the "supreme technology to awaken that awareness and take you into your original Self" (Bhajan, 2003, p. 17). It is a comprehensive form of yoga that combines physical practices, breathing exercises, and meditation.

*Kundalini* is Sanskrit for *coiled* and is described as a coil of energy that lays dormant at the base of the spine (Bhajan, 2003). It is suggested that this dormant energy is awakened and stimulated through the practice, leading to awakened experiences of consciousness (Bhajan, 2003). Additionally, it is argued that this flow of energy and consciousness that exists within us enables us to merge with or yoke our individual

consciousness with universal consciousness, thereby creating a Divine union, called yoga.

Traditionally, the techniques of Kundalini were only communicated from Master to disciple and through a long initiation process. Yogi Bhajan (aka Siri Singh Sahib Bhai Sahib Harbhajan Singh Khalsa Yogiji) was just 8 years old when he began his yogic training with an enlightened teacher, Sant Hazara Singh, who proclaimed him to be a Master of Kundalini Yoga when he was 16 ½ . Under the guidance of Guru Ram Das, the Fourth Sikh Master, at the age of 39 Yogi Bhajan immigrated to the United States in 1969 and gave his first lecture to an empty high school gym.

Known as the first to teach Kundalini Yoga openly to the public, Yogi Bhajan continued to work toward his vision to bring Kundalini Yoga to the youth of the drug culture of the 1960s. "He recognized their experimentation with drugs and 'altered states of consciousness' expressed a deeper desire to experience a holistic, liberating sense of awareness and a longing for family, for connection with themselves and one another" (http://www.yogibhajan.org, 2011). For over forty years Yogi Bhajan's lectures on Vedic philosophy and the Kundalini Yoga and meditation techniques have spread rapidly as young people around the world adopted the teachings and the lifestyle (http://www.yogibhajan.org, 2011).

Kundalini Yoga also encompasses all of Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga into a singular practice or set. Patanjali, known for his masterpiece of yogic philosophy, identified eight interrelated aspects of yoga practice (Bhajan, 2003; Prabhavanda & Isherwood, 2007). Whereas a majority of yoga practiced in the United States tends to focus on either cultivating the body without chanting and meditation, or cultivating the

mind through meditation without building physical vitality through exercise, by incorporating all eight limbs, Kundalini Yoga develops the entire spectrum of body and mind as a whole system. (Bhajan, 2003) Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan® is considered the most comprehensive of yoga traditions: a Raj yoga, which combines meditation, mantra, physical exercises, and breathing techniques.

Yogi Bhajan has said there are over 22 major forms of the practice of yoga (Bhajan, 2003). Different forms of yoga have different emphases: on developing physical strength, posture, and alignment, as in Hatha Yoga; the use of sound, as in Laya (Mantra) yoga; or the use of visual forms, as in Yantra yoga. Each one emphasizes some facet of the whole. Georg Feuerstein (1998) likened the various yoga methods to the analogous wheel. The spokes are the diverse schools and movements of yoga. The rim symbolizes the moral requirements shared by all types of yoga, while the hub stands for transcendental reality—that single center, that Universal consciousness (Feuerstein, 1998). All authentic forms of yoga carry the same purpose and goal: raising the kundalini, that dormant power of Infinity, that creative potential in every human being; the only differences lie in the time and the technique to reach that purpose.

In the yoga sutras, it is said that in order to transform we must first overcome the noise in our mind to find an inner quiet and stillness from which to cultivate expanded awareness. Patanjali calls that expanded awareness “the seer with a bird’s eye view” (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2007, p.16). Others have come to understand living with expanded awareness as witness consciousness (Cope, 1999; Stapleton, 2004). Witness consciousness, or what is understood in Kundalini Yoga as an essential aspect of living in

expanded awareness (Bhajan, 2003), is the ability to closely observe what is occurring internally and externally without reactivity or judgment.

The Upanishads, the Hindu philosophical scriptures, say Kundalini Yoga is the fastest way to create the transformation, the lightening, and the enlightenment that each individual is seeking. It is considered by some to be the fastest way to establish an aligned relationship between the body, mind, and soul (Easwaran, 2007; Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002). This is because Kundalini Yoga is designed for the everyday householder. It is the path of practical enlightenment. In other words, you don't have to be a human pretzel or a yogi living in an Indian Ashram to be enlightened. It is an effective, practical, do-able, and comprehensive spiritual somatic practice that offers the practitioner tools to put enlightenment into practice every day, giving one a direct experience of his or her highest consciousness (Bhajan, 2003; S.P.K. Khalsa, 1996; D. Khalsa, 2002). In fact, in the recent rise of safety concerns around the practice of yoga where practitioners are pressured to push themselves beyond their physical limits, Kundalini Yoga's do-ability factor situates itself as a less competitive, more restorative approach (Broad, 2012). The absence of more challenging asanas (postures) such as headstands and handstands emphasizes how asanas are just one component of the entire Kundalini Yoga practice.

Kundalini Yoga is a spiritual practice, as it has focus on meditation, mantras, and philosophy, all of which focus on enabling practitioners to experience enlightenment and heightened consciousness. It is a somatic practice, as it focuses on specific body postures and relaxation, as well as on breathing. The combination of the physical, or somatic, with the spiritual is what makes this style of yoga a spiritual somatic practice.

Kundalini Yoga offers that totality of experience by incorporating a synchronized balance of pranayama (breath control), asana (postures), mantra (chanting), meditation and savasana (relaxation) that positively affect the nervous system, glandular system and endocrine system (Bhajan, 2003; D. Khalsa, 2002). Kundalini Yoga is the science of experience. Its purpose is to raise personal and collective awareness through one's experience of a sequence of yoga postures, breath, and sound (mantras, chants) that are integrated together to allow the manifestation of a particular state (a facet of one's awareness). If one believes somatic awareness, self-awareness, and heightened consciousness can lead to healing, then this practice can be used as an effective tool to heal, empower, and transform.

**Kundalini Yoga Class Sequence**

The formula of a Kundalini Yoga class structure (or personally designed practice) is fixed to include the tune-in mantra, breath practice (pranayam), postures and movement (kriyas), deep relaxation, meditation, and the closing prayer or song. While the sequences may differ from class to class, the components are fixed. The general sequence of a Kundalini Yoga class is as follows:

**Tuning in with the Adi Mantra.** A mantra is the creative projection of the mind through sound. *Man* = mind. *Trang* = wave or projection. The science of mantra is based on the knowledge that chanting creates a sound current. And sound is a form of energy that can influence the mind and the physical body, enabling the practitioner to reach a state of emotional neutrality (Bhajan, 2003). The practitioner begins every Kundalini Yoga class (or personal practice) by chanting the Adi Mantra. The words *Ong Namo Guru Dev Namo* are chanted three times. The Adi Mantra translates to *I bow to the*

*totality of all things that exist and to the wisdom within my own consciousness* (G. Khalsa, 2000). In Kundalini Yoga, mantra is generally used during the meditation component of the class as well.

**Pranayam or breathwork.** In yogic philosophy, it is understood that the breath is life force. *Prana* = life force. *Ayam* = expansion. The practice of pranayama is the expansion of the life force within the practitioner by controlling the movement of prana through the use of breathing techniques. Therefore, pranayam is an essential piece of Kundalini Yoga practice. Mastery of the breath is understood to be a foundation for promoting health and vitality, opening the range and creativity of emotions, bringing a calmness and stillness to the mind, controlling moods, developing concentration and promoting a sense of connectedness (Bhajan, 2003).

**Kriya or physical exercise.** *Kriya* = action. A kriya in Kundalini Yoga is a set or sequence of postures, breath, and sound that are integrated to create a specific state (Bhajan, 2003). For example, *Sun Salutation* is a sequence of postures and breathing performed by the practitioner. The whole of the sequence is called a *kriya*. The meaning and purpose behind Kundalini kriyas is all about experience. A practitioner practices a kriya through the removal of blocks, attachments, blindness, and ego that hold her back and keep her disconnected from her Self and her world. Oftentimes, a short kriya (or set of physical exercises) is given to warm up the body, followed by a longer kriya, which tends to take up the bulk of the class time.

**Deep relaxation.** The entire kriya is commonly followed by a 10-minute deep relaxation or yogic sleep called yoga nidra. Corpse pose or shavaasana is known as the best position for this yogic sleep. The practitioner lies on her back, arms at the sides, with

the palms facing up and the ankles uncrossed. Relaxation is an important part of the rhythm of exercise and change in Kundalini Yoga. Since the Kundalini kriya helps to elevate the practitioner's physiological and neural states, relaxation serves to integrate the mind-body changes that occurred by distributing the prana stimulated by the exercises, circulating glandular changes, rejuvenating the parasympathetic nervous system, releasing rigid patterns in the muscles and blood flow and centering one's emotional energies (Bhajan, 2003; van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996).

**Meditation.** Meditation is the process of controlling and transcending the waves of the mind by balancing and clearing out self-defeating thought patterns, attachments, and habitual behaviors. Through the use of refined patterns, meditation creates a communication between the practitioner and the mind, and between the mind and the body. The purpose of meditation in Kundalini Yoga is to cleanse the subconscious mind and align the mind with the vision of the soul (Bhajan, 2003). A Kundalini Yoga class (or personal designed practice) culminates with a 3 – 7 minute meditation. Meditations generally utilize a mudra, or hand and finger placement, with specific eye focus, sitting in a specific pose and consciously breathing or chanting.

**Closing Prayer or Longtime Sun song**. Every Kundalini Yoga class or practice concludes by singing the words to the Longtime Sun: "May the longtime sun shine upon you; All love surround you; And the pure light within you; Guide your way on." This provides a heartful and prayerful closure for the class experience or personal practice (Bhajan, 2003).

## Definitions of Other Key Terms

### Trauma

Trauma is caused by a severely stressful occurrence, event, or experience that produces lasting psychological and emotional pain, and that overwhelms the ordinary human adaptations to life and meaningful relation to life (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; van der Kolk et al., 1996). Trauma is "a situation of feeling an outsize helplessness and a paralysis in our ability to affect a situation" (Naparstek, 2004, p. 40). Trauma is experienced as a life disruption that has left a human being feeling helpless, immobilized, and disconnected, stuck in the memory of the past and unable to connect to the present, to one's Self, one's purpose and to one's world.

### Dharma

Dharma is when one's life path is aligned with one's Infinite, authentic Self. When we are living in dharma, "we are in flow with the universe, with our spirit, and with our basic nature" (Bhajan, 2003, p.229). When one is living, doing, and being from a place of authenticity in connection with a higher, Divine calling or purpose, he or she is living in Dharma.

### Meditation

An integral component of the Kundalini Yoga experience, meditation is the process of controlling and transcending the waves of the mind by balancing and clearing out self-defeating thought patterns, attachments, and habitual behaviors. Through the use of refined patterns, meditation creates a communication between the practitioner and the mind, and between the mind and the body.

**Asana**

An asana is a general term for posture within a Kundalini kriya.

**Prana**

The subtle life force, the sub-atomic energy. The first unit of energy. Prana is the motion and coding of life energies through the realms of the mind and body (Bhajan, 2003).

**Pranayam**

*Prana* = life force. *Ayam* = expansion. The practice of pranayama is the expansion of the life force within the practitioner by controlling the movement of prana through the use of breathing techniques.

**Chakras**

Chakra means wheel. Chakras are energy centers, or energy vortices. They exist as dynamic energies, and they can be used to understand the way energy is processed by a human being within the vast and complex interplay of a multi-leveled existence. Kundalini Yoga focuses on the eight major chakras. Seven of the chakras correspond to areas of the endocrine system or to nerve plexes in the physical body, and the eighth corresponds to the aura or magnetic field of the body. (Bhajan, 2003)

**Sadhana**

Sadhana means a daily spiritual practice. It is a practice of self-discipline that allows one to express the Infinite within one's self. A practitioner consciously chooses to rise up early, to exercise the body, and to meditate. It is a time each day to notice the patterns that lead one away from higher consciousness, in order to transcend those patterns. Sadhana clears the subconscious, thereby keeping the mind clear to accurately

guide our actions through the day.

**Spirit**

Spirit is rooted in the Greek word *spiritus* meaning *vital essence* (Zohar, 2007). "As no lamp can burn without a combustible fuel, so no life can exist without a relationship to the spirit in it. Spirit has many meanings, tones and facets. If there is a central thread in it, it is the general flow of the cosmic energy. In Catholicism, we call that flow God. In yoga, we call that flow Cosmic Energy. The two meanings and the One Reality are exactly the same. You have to understand your relationship with that Infinite Energy. You must learn how you can tune in to accomplish your own purpose. You can have a healthy, happy, holy, wholesome life, a fulfilled life, a beautiful life" (www.3ho.org).

**Awareness**

Awareness is experienced and achieved through an internal felt sense and connection to the body, mind, and spirit, and the external sense and connection with others and the world at large. It is being a sensitive observer to one's own existence, sensations, thoughts, and actions. Through awareness one can experience life as an observer, recognizing the choices one is making and the implications and consequences of those choices.

**Consciousness**

Consciousness arises and is activated when you awaken and live in awareness. (Bhajan, 2003). Consciousness is living in Oneness, recognizing and embodying one's connection to Self (body, mind, and spirit), to all living beings, and to God and/or the Universe. Consciousness is not in us, we are in it, in the vast field of consciousness. We

all share the same consciousness, the pure cognition underlying our individual contents. The deeper we go into our own being, the deeper and more intimate is our contact with nature and with people. Indeed, in consciousness the wall between us and them, between inner and outer, begins to dissolve.

## Summary

Having described a bit of what this study is about, having laid the groundwork for the context of the study of Kundalini Yoga as a spiritual somatic practice that can be effective in healing the aftermath of trauma, the next chapter offers a foundation in the literature. In addition to reviewing literature on the study of yoga in healing trauma, I begin with a definition and description of what trauma is and its effects, as described in the literature. The introduction to Chapter 2 goes into further depth about the other literatures reviewed, such as literatures on somatics, neuroscience, posttraumatic growth, and developmental psychology. Chapter 3 discusses the literature on phenomenology, along with laying out the methodology. Chapter 4 provides a look at the participants in this study, and the data from it, while Chapter 5 connects this study's findings with those of the literature, highlighting new findings in this study.

# CHAPTER TWO: EXPLORATION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Thanks to the wisdom and dedicated work of the scholars that came before me, I have been blessed to situate myself at the theoretical and practical crossroads of four literatures that inform this study: trauma, yoga, post-traumatic growth, and phenomenology. Perspectives from the fields of neuroscience, somatics, and developmental psychology further support and inform this review.

This first section of this chapter explores and describes trauma and its impact on survivors, how it manifests in the body and mind, as well as the difficulties treating it using traditional therapies. It also explores the neurobiological impact of trauma, the psychosocial impact of trauma, trauma treatment, and somatics' place in trauma treatment.

The second section delves into the literature on somatics. The third section explores the construct of personal and post-traumatic growth, supported by the tenets of developmental psychology. The fourth section describes the current research on yoga and its effects on the mind and body, as well as budding research on the use of yoga (and similar practices of somatics and mindfulness) as an alternative and complementary treatment of trauma. Phenomenology, as both philosophy and method, will be explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

## What is Trauma?

Trauma breaks us open. Trauma tests us. It also provides us with opportunities to deeply explore who we are, where we've been, and where we are heading. It shapes us, teaching us what is truly important and what is trivial. It teaches us how to survive (van der Kolk et al., 1996; Naparstek, 2004).

The official definition used to diagnose trauma states that it is caused by a severely stressful occurrence, event, or experience that produces lasting psychological injury or pain (Emerson, Sharma, Chaudhury, & Turner, 2009; Kessler, 1987; van der Kolk et al., 1996). A wide range of situations can catalyze trauma and the post-traumatic stress that ensues. "Trauma may result from overwhelming or violent physical experiences or from difficult psychological and emotional experiences. Its impact may be sudden and dramatic or the result of gradual and unrelenting violations of our very sense of self" (Emerson & Hopper, 2011, p. xiv). Whether it is experienced through combat, a grievous loss, sexual abuse, or a life-threatening diagnosis, the common denominator of all of these traumatic experiences is that they involve some sort of threat to our physical, emotional, and/or psychological safety.

Traumatic events are extraordinary not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life and the meaningful relations to life. Be it a threat to life or emotional and bodily integrity or a close encounter with violence and death, trauma arrests the course of normal development by its repetitive intrusion into a survivor's life (Herman, 1992; Levine, 1997, 2005). Trauma experts Blaustein and Kinniburgh described it best:

> The experience of trauma is complex. Trauma varies in type, source, chronicity, and impact; it is experienced at different developmental stages, within different contexts—family, community, and culture—and in the presence or absence of different internal and external resources and challenges. It is not surprising, then, that disparity exists in our understanding of trauma, its manifestations and its proper treatment. (2010, p. 4)

For the purposes of this research study, I used trauma expert Belleruth Naparstek's definition as the foundation upon which I built my understanding of trauma. "Trauma, of course, by its very nature, is a situation of feeling an outsize helplessness and a paralysis in our ability to affect a situation" (Naparstek, 2004, p. 40). I understand trauma to be some life-changing event, occurrence, or experience that has disrupted a human being's understanding of the world and has left that human being feeling helpless and immobilized, stuck in the memory of the past, and unable to connect to the present. Bessel van der Kolk supported this understanding: "Trauma is no longer about what happened in the past, but the residue or tyranny of the past left in the present body" (van der Kolk et al., 1996, pp. 5-6). In the face of these layers of helplessness, trauma survivors need to restore their sense of efficacy, power, and self-control. As a first order of healing, they strive to reclaim ownership over themselves and the present moment (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2002, 2006).

**Neuroscience: Neurobiological Impact of Trauma**

The complex array of symptoms associated with trauma seems to be due in part to the ways that traumatic experiences can alter one's physiology, brain structure, and functioning, which in turn can cause secondary psychological and social issues (van der Kolk, 2006; Scaer, 2007). For instance, trauma can have a significant impact on the brain stem, creating difficulty with regulating arousal (Cohen, Perel, Debellis, Friedman, & Putnam, 2002). Complex trauma seems to overwhelm one's biological system with chronic neurotransmitter abnormalities related to arousal and attention, causing the stress response to be easily triggered. The natural stress response involves the release of hormones that activate the sympathetic nervous system and prepare the body to quickly

respond to threat (Yehuda, 1999, 2000). This response is adaptive in isolated situations, as the body rebalances itself once the threat is removed. However, when stress is chronic, the system is compromised and persistently forced into overdrive. Prolonged exposure to threat also seems to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which elicits a state of immobilization or freezing as an adaptive response to chronic hyper-stimulation (Yehuda, 2001). In other words, trauma can cause the nervous system to become over-responsive, making it difficult for individuals to adjust their level of physiological arousal (Heim & Numeroff, 2001; Scaer, 2007; Yehuda, 2000).

During a traumatic experience, the brain is deeply affected. The brain is a complex mechanism, comprised of one quadrillion (a million billion) connections, a number that is essentially infinite. Trauma can overwhelm the flow of energy through these connections and confuse the brain, leaving pieces of the experience unprocessed. Because these manifestations tend to be held in the intuitive, somatic areas of the brain (the right hemisphere and the mammalian and reptilian regions), it is difficult for us to "talk" our way out of trauma.

One's ability to describe and express the pain of the event or incident in words is impaired to where one cannot simply "talk one's way out of it." Talking is primarily a left-hemisphere activity. One does not work through trauma by just talking about it. In order to complete the healing process, a traumatized person must access the limbic system and the right hemisphere of the brain where body sensations and feelings are stored (Naparstek, 2004; Scaer, 2007; Levine, 1997; van der Kolk, 2006).

A profound lesson from contemporary neuroscience research is that our sense of ourselves is anchored in a vital connection with our bodies. Neuroscientist Antonio

Damasio has shown that an area in the brain called the insula is the place that transmits bodily sensations into conscious awareness. Brain-imaging studies (Lazar et al., 2000; Lazar et al., 2005) of traumatized people show decreased activation in the insula and other areas related to self awareness. Damasio proposed that the felt core self generates a feeling of knowing (1999, pp. 171-172) that comes before verbalization and autobiographical consciousness.

A trauma sufferer experiences sensitivity and heightened reactivity in the amygdala and its surrounding neuronal network, part of the right hemisphere of the brain that processes emotions and sensations. When this happens, Broca's area, the part of the left hemisphere of the brain that creates cognition and translates experience into language, temporarily loses its capacity as a result of the biochemistry of the trauma (Naparstek, 2004; Scaer, 2007; Rauch, et al., 1996; Shin, et al., 1997).

Trauma is toxic to the brain. It triggers both less activity in the prefrontal cortex, and an overactive limbic system, which create neurobiological changes that cause psychosocial consequences (presence/attention, effective action, verbal expression, relationships). Less activity in the medial prefrontal cortex is associated with difficulties in executive functioning (processing and interpreting information) and more activity in the limbic structures, primarily the amygdala (van der Kolk, 2004, pp. 329-331). Heightened activity in the amygdala is associated with difficulties assessing the emotional significance of incoming stimuli. Problems with the limbic system can result in irritability, negative perceptions of current events, and overwhelming negative emotion (Davidson et al, 2003).

*Disconnection* and *dissociation* are terms that refer to the cycle of hyperarousal, numbed responsiveness, or avoidance of external environment and internal states that make it difficult to attend to and accurately interpret emotion and internal sensations (Carter, Botvinick, & Cohen, 1999; Naparstek, 2004; van der Kolk, 2006). In fact, it is not uncommon for individuals to feel overwhelmed by inner sensations, which can lead to avoidance of internal states and disconnection or dissociation (van der Kolk, 2006).

A common denominator of all traumas is an alienation and disconnection from the body and a reduced capacity to be present in the here and now (Emerson & Hopper, 2011, p. xi). Traumatized people who cannot spontaneously dissociate may attempt to produce similar numbing effects by using alcohol or narcotics (Herman, 1992, p. 45). Because these altered states keep the traumatic experience walled off from ordinary consciousness, they prevent the integration necessary for healing.

Many traumatized individuals do not see their bodies as belonging to them or under their control. They frequently disconnect from their bodily experience, as past experiences have taught them that it feels better to separate oneself from this unsafe place (Levine, 2005; van der Kolk, 2006; Westerlund, 1992). Many report experiencing a lack of integration with parts of their body or a sense of disembodiment or emptiness, and some report not being able to experience an inner sense of themselves at all (Attias & Goodwin, 1999; van der Kolk, 2006; Westerlund, 1992).

Trauma can have significant effects on interpersonal functioning (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Luxenberg, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2001). Traumatized individuals find it difficult to engage in relationships. Disconnection from emotional and bodily

states prevents a person from truly knowing him- or herself, and consequently limits the possibility of fully sharing oneself with another (Luxenberg, et al., 2001).

Poor body satisfaction and self-esteem have been correlated with self-critical feelings regarding intimacy and self-worth (Armsworth, Stronk, & Carlson, 1999). The experience of trauma and dealing with its aftermath can lead to significant impairments in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and systems of meaning (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Herman, 1992). Negative self-perception seems almost an inevitable consequence of trauma (Luxenberg et al., 2001; van der Kolk, Roth, Pelcovitz, Sunday, & Spinazzola, 2005).

No agency or control refers to not being able to use internal states and emotions as useful information about the present moment. It leaves traumatized individuals unable to determine their current needs or take effective action (van der Kolk et al., 1996). Trauma is an affliction of the powerless. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman, 1992, p. 33). The process of being traumatized involves a fundamental lack of choice: being unable to prevent the event from occurring. The accompanying feelings of overwhelm and helplessness can result in an increasingly damaged sense of agency in the world, and a complete lack of faith that one can do anything to improve one's situation or change one's life.

Traumatized individuals' many life lessons from their past experiences may lead to a sense that life brings bad things, existential isolation, spiritual and religious questioning, or lack of purpose or meaning in life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Herman, 1992; Luxenberg et al, 2001). People may also feel unable to effect change in their lives,

or they may foreclose on or not believe in their futures (Herman, 1992; Luxenberg et al., 2001; van der Kolk, et al., 2005). This all prevents traumatized people from actively engaging in and responding to their present moment experience, hence they cannot effectively navigate the world, being unable to attune to messages of the internal self and unable to use emotions as signals to internal states (van der Kolk et al., 1996).

**Trauma Treatment**

Most therapeutic models in trauma treatment rely on a verbally oriented therapeutic relationship and verbally based (top-down processing) therapy methods to help address trauma through the cognitive and psychological exploration of thoughts and feelings, supplemented with group therapy and medications. According to Ogden, Minton, and Pain (2006), these do not give proper attention to body sensations and internal states, or bottom-up processing. Thus, these therapies do not directly address the physiological symptoms related to trauma and the way trauma is remembered in the body (van der Kolk et al., 1996; Wylie, 2009).

Recent trauma recovery research reveals how Western medicine's roots in Cartesian dualism have alienated us from our bodies (D. H. Johnson, 1992, p. 23). In order to heal our traumas and transform our lives, we need to reconcile that mind-body split, moving out of our disembodied minds in order to embody our lived experience. Dossey (1989) also wrote that many of the traditional verbal, cognitive therapeutic approaches are symptomatic of the western positivist view (body-soul split), prioritizing mental insight over the impactful role of embodied experience and spiritual belief and practice on the healing process.

The spiritual dimension of health is now beginning to be recognized as being able

to provide support for health and healing (Wardell & Engebretson, 2006). Trauma treatment facilities are seeking out complementary therapies to supplement medical care to create a system that is more congruent with the human experience (Astin, 1998; Barnes, Powell- Griner, McFann, & Nahin, 2004). In a review of more than 1,200 studies on religion and health, the majority showed a significant statistical association between religious activity and better mental and physical health (Weaver, Flannelly, Stone, & Dossey, 2003).

Rituals and various forms of religious and spiritual experience have long been associated with healing (Bullock & Trombley, 1999). Spirituality in its deepest meaning is about totality, about the whole (Walach, 2007). Bormann and colleagues' study examined the use of noninvasive strategies such as breathing and chanting to enhance coping and health in combat veterans experiencing posttraumatic stress. Practitioners experienced greater states of calm and deeper acceptance of life and deeper spiritual connection (Bormann, Thorpe, Wetherell, & Golshan, 2008).

In addition to growing recognition and use of spirituality as potentially necessary to healing, many researchers and practitioners have recognized that traditional talk-based therapy, focusing on the mind and the story of the trauma, is not enough, as it tends to neglect the physical, visceral, and body-based dimensions of the trauma. What more and more research is uncovering is how trauma is not the story of something overwhelmingly awful that happened in the past, but the residue of imprints left behind in people's sensory and hormonal systems (Levine, 2005; Scaer, 2007; van der Kolk, 2006; van der Kolk et al., 1996).

The most recent research within the world of trauma and recovery has set off an explosion of knowledge about psychobiology and the interaction of body and mind. While talk-based therapy serves a critical role in the healing process, more and more clinicians have begun to recognize the need to bring the body into the healing milieu (Innes, Bourguignon, & Taylor, 2005; Innes & Vincent, 2007; Isaacs, 2009; Lazar, 2005; Lazar & Benson, 2002; Lazar, et al., 2000; Lazar et al., 2005; Shridhare, 2009; van der Kolk, 2006).

One leading researcher building the bridge between trauma recovery and somatic practice is Peter A. Levine, psychologist and originator of the somatic healing approach, Somatic Experiencing. According to Levine, trauma is primarily biological, and secondarily psychological or cognitive. "The roots of trauma lie in our instinctual physiologies. As a result, it is through our bodies, as well as our minds, that we discover the key to healing" (Levine, 2005, p. 34). Trauma is lived out in the body, and trauma can remain locked in the body. Therefore, it is through the body that it must be accessed and healed (Levine, 1997, 2005; Rothschild, 2000, 2010; van der Kolk, 2006, 2010). "Until we understand that traumatic symptoms are physiological as well as psychological, we will be woefully inadequate in our attempts to heal them" (Levine, 1997, p. 32).

For more than 20 years, psychiatrist and traumatologist Bessel van der Kolk has been in the forefront of research in the psychobiology of trauma and an advocate for somatic approaches to trauma recovery. van der Kolk's continued commitment to understanding the effects of psychological disturbance on the body and research on somatic healing practices, such as yoga and martial arts, has legitimized the mind-body connection and the importance of somatic therapies in mainstream psychiatry. His

Trauma Sensitive Yoga program, established in 2003 at The Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts, works with trauma-focused clinicians to provide ongoing yoga classes to a variety of trauma survivors, including war veterans, rape survivors, at-risk youth, and survivors of chronic childhood abuse and neglect. As one of the world's leading experts in posttraumatic stress disorder and an advocate for somatic healing practices, van der Kolk has claimed that yoga offers an essential technique for releasing the trauma that is held in the physical body and for reintegrating mind and body (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; van der Kolk, 2010).

van der Kolk (2006) posited an increasingly common perspective in the field of trauma treatment, which is that individuals must heal the internal residue of the past in order to address the symptoms, memories, thoughts, and feelings of a past trauma that intrudes into current experiences. If past trauma is held in the body through heightened physiological states, automatic response patterns, sensory perception and processing, emotions and thought, effective therapies may need to foster increased interoceptive awareness, also known as somatic awareness or lived embodiment, and self-regulation.

Given that most available interventions tend not to address fully the multiple layers of healing and symptoms, researchers are attempting to identify complementary and alternative treatments that effectively target the array of symptoms associated with trauma. Within this area of study, increasing attention is being paid to traditional mindfulness practices, such as yoga and meditation (Emerson et al., 2009; Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006; Follette, Palm, & Rasmussen-Hall, 2004; Fulton, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, et al., 1992). The common goal of these mindfulness-based techniques is bringing awareness into the present moment with acceptance and without judgment.

Some complementary treatment approaches (body-oriented treatments, sensorimotor approaches) are aimed at creating interoceptive awareness (versus avoidance and disconnection) of internal states and external environment, and teaching self-regulation of physiological arousal (Chemtob, Tolin, van der Kolk, & Pitman, 2000; Ogden, et al., 2006). These mind-body approaches rebuild connection between body and brain (Follette & Vijay, 2008; Levin, Lazrove, & van der Kolk, 1999). They can also help strengthen the capacity to be engaged in the present moment, raising awareness of present moment experiences rather than past trauma, and create opportunities for making conscious choices on how to respond to present moments. Awareness of the here-and-now gives a more accurate picture of any given situation, making it easier to identify options for problem-solving.

Psychologist and developer of the focusing technique, Eugene Gendlin, also supported the need for a somatic approach in healing trauma. According to Gendlin, focusing and training one's awareness on the body, its sensations, and *felt sense*, rather than only on the cognitive content, is the cleanest and quickest route to healing and resolution (Gendlin, 2007). Hence, yoga and meditation, when skillfully employed, can uniquely address the somatic needs of the trauma survivor by providing a way to cultivate a friendly, safe, and trusting relationship to his or her body, in order to access, feel, move, and heal traumatic residue out of the muscle, tissue, and nervous system (Emerson et al., 2009; Naparstek, 2004).

## Somatics: Why the Body?

> "Without the body, how can the highest human goal be realized?" Kularnava Tantra (Avalon, 2000)

One cannot delve into the world of embodied research without paying homage to the "patron saint of the body," phenomenological philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for his champion philosophical and phenomenological work in proving the body's primacy in human experience and meaning. Merleau-Ponty explained how our lived experiences are embodied experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). He insisted that the body is not only the crucial source of all perception and action, but the core of our expressive capability and thus the ground of all language and meaning. It shapes how we come to know our world.

The new and expanding world of somatic disciplines supports my experience and understanding of how, in a developed and committed somatic practice, the body can be a site of sharpened perception, increased knowledge, and practical discipline that can improve our lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Shusterman, 2008). Richard Shusterman explained how the body constitutes an essential, fundamental dimension of our identity, which "puts experience at the heart of philosophy and celebrates the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience" (Shusterman, 2008, p. xii). It forms our mode of engagement with the world, thereby determining and structuring (often unconsciously) our needs, habits, interests, and pleasures. So, if embodied experience is so formative of our being and connection to the world, then it would follow that body consciousness (heightened somatic consciousness) warrants cultivating in order to improve one's use of the self in interaction with the world.

Candace Pert demonstrated the biochemistry of our emotions and their effect on our physiology (1997). She uncovered how the mind is not focused in the head, but is distributed via signal molecules to the whole body. Recent developments in neuroscience

also present a neurological, theoretical basis for the mind-body connection, by attempting to explain the biological operations attached to somatic awareness through cognitive science (Damasio, 1999; Lipton, 2008). Research and studies in somatic awareness have demonstrated how understanding and mastering a somatic practice involves and cultivates agency (Alexander & Maisel, 2000; Shusterman, 2008; LaFountain, 2008). Various study participants have described a sense of empowerment through their expanding somatic awareness (Alexander & Maisel, 2000; Levine, 1997; Price, 2005; Shusterman, 2008).

Elizabeth Behnke (1997) was one of the first to introduce me to the world of somatic awareness. By tuning into and examining one's feelings and experience from the inside, one can get a deeper understanding of how bodily sensations mix with consciousness to create somatic awareness. Since memories can be stored in parts of the body other than the brain (Pearsall, 1998), by focusing and engaging one's *felt sense*, one can uncover a slew of emotions and psychological residue trapped in the body (Gendlin, 2007).

The world of somatics and physiology research continues to present itself as a supportive home for yoga research. F. Alexander, the somatic practitioner and father of the Alexander technique, demonstrated how understanding and mastering a somatic practice involves agency and awareness, corroborating the embodied benefits of a Kundalini Yoga practice. Tina Stromstead (2001), psychotherapist and dance therapist, used Authentic Movement as a tool for self-recovery, self-discovery, and self-mastery.

According to Stromstead (2001), "unresolved physical and emotional trauma is often held in the body, in stasis, until it can be brought to consciousness," reconfirming

how the role of the body in transformation work cannot be overlooked (p. 41). Richard Shusterman's (2008) healing work also promotes the importance of one's somatic awareness and embodied experience. One of many questions Shusterman posed was, "Without critical somatic consciousness, how can we correct faulty habits and improve our somatic self-use?" Through disciplined cultivation of heightened somatic self-awareness, the somatic practitioner can recognize and connect to her authority to guide her through potential transformations (p. 130). Through spiritual somatic practices such as yoga (Morley, 2008) and tai chi (LaFountain, 2008), the body can become a vessel for healing and transformation, affirming the primacy of somatic consciousness.

Shusterman (2008) advocated greater attention to somatic self-consciousness through a systematic philosophical framework he called somaesthetics. Somaesthetics, which grew out of his earlier work in philosophical pragmatism, is concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning. This disciplined cultivation can prove an invaluable tool for pursuing a "philosophical life" of self-discovery and self-improvement. Shusterman's defense of reflective body consciousness (self-awareness) suggests that heightened somatic consciousness can improve our perception of and engagement with the outside world by improving our use of the self, which is a fundamental instrument of all perception and action.

Don Hanlon Johnson, founder of the Somatics Program, took this idea a step further. According to Johnson, "sensing, feeling, breathing, moving, postural changes and excitation are crucial factors in the human search for meaning" (Johnson, 2005, p. 115). Healing and transformation takes place in the creative interweaving of these

essential threads of body and mind: deepened somatic awareness and witness consciousness.

According to Judith Blackstone, psychotherapist and developer of the embodied Realization process, “the body is our instrument of realization. Enlightenment occurs in and through the body” (Blackstone, 2008, p.114). Through inhabiting the body fully and accessing the detached observer or witness, the yoga practitioner learns to achieve that non-reactive, non-judgmental yogic space of stillness and clarity.

Shusterman (2008) believed there are limits to the efficacy of unreflective habits, even on the level of basic bodily actions. He stated we can unreflectively acquire bad habits just as easily as good ones. And once bad habits are acquired, how do we correct them? This is where disciplines of somatic training come in. They invoke representations and self-conscious body focusing in order to correct our faulty self-perception and use of our embodied selves (p. 63). Shusterman went on to explain how these disciplines (from the ancient Asian practices to modern systems like the Alexander technique and Feldenkrais method) do not aim to erase the crucial level of unreflective behavior, but instead seek to improve unreflective behavior that hinders our experience and performance. Yoga and other somatic practices invoke self-awareness and self-conscious body focusing in order to correct our faulty self-perception, psychological blocks, and use of our embodied selves (Shusterman, 2008; Bhajan, 2003).

The journey to living with an expanded awareness of what many call witness consciousness requires establishing a trusting connection to our bodies and respecting the wisdom it has to share by way of felt senses (Cope, 1999; Kripalu, 2008; Stapleton, 2004). In order to access the witness, the practitioner must connect to and through the

body (Blackstone, 2008; Cope, 1999). This brings attention to another significantly essential aspect of living in "yoga" and in expanded awareness: somatic awareness or lived embodiment. The yogic tradition considers the body to be a temple or earthly vessel for consciousness (Stapleton, 2004).

Shusterman (2008) wrote in defense of somatic disciplines such as Kundalini Yoga. I appreciated Shusterman's defensive stance in support of the somatic discipline of Kundalini Yoga that many practice around the world. Developing and committing to a practice of reflective somatic consciousness can demonstrate how the body can be a site of sharpened perception, increased knowledge, and practical discipline that can improve our lived experience.

## Posttraumatic Growth

> "And the time came when the pain to remain tight in the bud became greater than the risk it took to blossom." Anais Nin (as cited in Millman, 2000)

There is a long tradition in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, reaching at least back to World War I, of studying the response of people who are faced with traumatic circumstances and devising ways to restore them to psychological health. The main focus of this work has been on the ways in which traumatic events are contributors to psychological and physical problems. This negative focus is understandable and appropriate to the requirements of these contexts. However, only a minority of people exposed to traumatic events develop long-standing psychiatric disorders. In the developing literature on post-traumatic growth, reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004b). In addition to the body of research exploring treatments to reduce

trauma-related impairments, the concept of personal and post-traumatic growth (the possibility that someone can grow psychologically through a meaning-making process in the aftermath of trauma) has gained attention in the past decade (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Linley & Joseph 2004a). The existing literature suggests that posttraumatic growth involves positive changes in a survivor's self-perception, how they value relationships with others and in their philosophy and perspective on life.

While trauma can disrupt one's view and understanding of the world and one's place in it, it can also result in enhancing personal growth, which is acknowledging one's personal strength, appreciating those around one, and valuing the small things. Research has demonstrated that many people experience such positive outcomes or growth, in addition to distressing and disruptive outcomes, as a result of dealing with trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Linley & Joseph, 2004a; McMillen, Zuraun, & Rideout, 1995). Approximately 50% of persons affected by a trauma will report at least one positive life change or benefit that is directly linked with the trauma (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

This evidence has led researchers and clinicians to call for a paradigm shift within the field of trauma, from a focus on psychopathology alone to a more inclusive focus that recognizes personal strength, growth, and empowerment (Bonanno, 2004). Some researchers have suggested that a primary focus on symptoms does not provide a comprehensive picture of trauma recovery and could limit the healing potential in treatment (Johnson, Worell, & Chandler, 2005). In other words, those who concur with this theory argue that treatment interventions can foster the greatest level of healing by considering ways to address symptoms and promote personal growth and empowerment

(Johnson et al., 2005). As doctors Richard G. Tedeschi, PhD, and Lawrence Calhoun, PhD, stated in their 2004 article, "Posttraumatic Growth: A New Perspective on Psychotraumatology" in *Psychiatric Times*, "the widespread assumption that trauma will often result in disorder should not be replaced with expectations that growth is an inevitable result. Instead, continuing personal distress and growth often coexist" (2004b, p. 60). They listed "improved relationships, new possibilities for one's life, a greater appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength and spiritual development" as some of the ways that traumatic experiences could actually enhance the psychological qualities of life of the survivor (p. 63).

The notion that positive changes can result from suffering has deep roots in humanistic and existential philosophies (Frankl, 1984; Jaffe, 1985; Kessler, 1987; Yalom, 1980). However, recent developments have included empirical studies of the topic and theoretical conceptualizations of posttraumatic growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004a; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). This research has revealed three main themes common to individuals who experience posttraumatic growth, regardless of the particular trauma (Joseph & Linley, 2006).

First, people often report a positive change in self-perception (resilience, wisdom, strength, self-acceptance). Second, people often experience an enhanced sense of connection in their relationships (valuing friendships or family, increased compassion for others). Third is a change in life philosophy, which might include a stronger appreciation for each day, realization of what is meaningful in life, or a greater sense of purpose. Although many people continue to experience distress around the traumatic experience and prefer it never happened, survivors who experience post-traumatic growth often

come to view their confrontation with trauma as a valued learning opportunity that changed them in positive ways as well (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Cohen, Hettler & Pane, 1998; Linley, 2003).

Various models of post-traumatic growth have been offered in the literature, such as the person-centered theory by Joseph (2005), the functional-descriptive model by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), the biopsychosocial-evolutionary view by Christopher (2004), and the organismic valuing theory by Joseph and Linley (2005). Joseph and Linley's organismic valuing theory (OVT) will be the primary framework used for understanding this concept, as it integrates the most prominent theories of posttraumatic growth.

OVT is based on organismic theory, which holds as central the tenet that people are active, growth-oriented organisms that are "naturally inclined to integrate their psychological experiences into a unified sense of self" in efforts to attain personal well being and fulfillment (Joseph & Linley, 2005, p. 269). According to OVT, people have an innate knowledge of what is best for them. Therefore, their actions are naturally guided by this knowledge, which is referred to as one's organismic valuing process—that wisdom within. The theory posits that after trauma a person will naturally work to integrate the information in a way that promotes growth. However, this process can be facilitated or impeded by two factors: first, a person's style of integrating trauma-related information, and second, the social environment.

The integration of trauma-related information refers to the notion that people adjust to trauma through an inherent tendency towards integration of new information. The information is either assimilated within existing perspectives of the world, or

existing perspectives of the world accommodate to the new information in a positive or negative way (Hollon & Garber, 1988). A person may negatively accommodate with a hopeless reaction (I'm helpless to random events) or positively accommodate with a more optimistic perspective (random events happen so I'd better live fully). Growth seems to occur when positive accommodation is used (Joseph & Linley, 2005). According to OVT (Joseph & Linley, 2005), the natural tendency is toward positive accommodation of the information, but this requires both an awareness of one's organismic valuing process and an appropriately supportive environment that allows for one's organismic valuing process to occur.

The social environment factor influences the process of growth if it promotes autonomy, competence, and connection, thereby increasing the chances of a person having the skills and freedom to act in accordance with her own organismic valuing process (Joseph & Linley, 2005). According to OVT, if a supportive environment is identified post trauma, one may have the opportunity to explore and express one's organismic valuing process; experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness; and in turn experience personal growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Facilitation of growth and healing occurs within a supportive therapeutic environment or practice that promotes autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Joseph & Linley, 2006).

**Developmental Psychology**

A humanistic approach to trauma focuses on the transformative therapeutic agents that help individuals move from *victim* to *survivor* to *thriver* in the face of trauma. From a humanistic perspective, a traumatic event is a disruption so serious that it threatens our existence, shaking the foundations of who we are and who we once were. It makes us

face our basic helplessness and mortality. Trauma confronts us with the reality of death, ripping through our sanitized lives and our monumental denial of death. Trauma is a wake-up call, reminding us that everyone dies. Every trauma that we experience shatters our sense of coherence and meaning (Serlin & Cannon, 2004, pp. 313-314).

Abraham Maslow, a founder of humanistic psychology, brought the study of transcendence and the language of self-actualization into the field of psychology to describe how individuals transcend trauma (2011). He coined the term *positive psychology* for the scientific study of optimal human functioning, which was popularized by psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman as the basis of a movement in psychology which emphasizes what is right with people, rather than what is wrong with them. Its mission is to understand and build the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. Its foundational beliefs are that people want more than an end to suffering; people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. As Maslow has stated, the human being is naturally impelled "forward toward wholeness of Self and uniqueness of Self, toward full functioning of all capacities, toward confidence in the face of the external world at the same time that he can accept his deepest, real, unconscious Self" (Maslow, 2011, p. 45).

## Yoga: The Effects of Practice

The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root *yug* meaning to yoke or unite, which signifies the interconnection of body, mind, and spirit (Desikachar, 1999). More specifically, the intention of yoga practice may be described as finding, building, and strengthening the connection between a practitioner and her mind, body, breath, feelings,

memories, physical experiences, and states of consciousness, as well as her interconnectedness to other living beings, her environment, and the universe (Ware, 2007). The use of yoga is gaining in popularity, not only in the general U.S. public (7.5% of U.S. adults have tried yoga at least once), but also in clinical settings, as it is one of the top 10 most widely practiced forms of complementary healthcare in the U.S. (Barnes, Powell-Griner, McFann, & Nahin, 2004; Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2009).

My research through the cultures of trauma, somatics, and neuroscience has shown how research pioneers have already started building bridges to yoga and yoga research. Thanks to such trailblazers, the scientific community is now beginning to further examine the claims that yoga can facilitate healing and promote optimal performance, flow states, and transformation. There are more and more studies on the biochemical effects of a yoga practice and how a regular yoga practice over time alters the fundamental biochemistry of the body (Streeter et al., 2007; Streeter et al., 2010; Lazar et al., 2002; Lazar et al., 2005a; Emerson & Hopper, 2011; D. Khalsa, 2002; S. Khalsa, 2006). The ancient somatic practice of yoga, which includes pranayama (breath control), asana (physical postures), and meditation is increasingly gaining acceptance as a potentially effective therapeutic tool for the treatment of trauma. According to yoga teachers and trauma experts Emerson and Hopper (2011), "Yoga became a major cornerstone in our understanding that it is imperative to befriend one's bodily sensations to overcome imprints of trauma" (p. xviii).

The focus of asanas is on flexibility, balance, strength and mental focus, rather than on aerobic fitness. Often, postures are held for a period of time with the intention to allow for maximum benefit, such as improving circulation or digestion, or providing a

sense of deep relaxation during and after exertion (Desikachar, 1999). Asanas also aim to encourage awareness and acceptance of the body and its functioning, as well as increase in comfort with movement (Ware, 2007). Pranayam techniques involve focused awareness on breath and connecting breath to movement (Desikachar, 1999). Meditation involves focused awareness and emphasis on present moment experience: finding stillness/relations, clear-minded concentration, equanimity, self-knowledge, and universal connection (Ware, 2007).

A regular practice of yoga postures, breathing exercises, and meditation helps practitioners to manage their anxiety, stress, and depression, overcome feelings of victimization, and relieve symptoms of post-traumatic stress by building self-esteem and fostering a greater sense of awareness and sense of control over one's life (S. Khalsa, 2004). By assimilating physical movement and restorative action patterns, yoga practitioners can build internal strengths and resources in an embodied manner. Yoga helps raise levels of oxcytocin, a hormone that reduces blood pressure, and cortisol levels, relaxing the whole body. With regular practice, yoga also improves the levels of GABA, a neurotransmitter that tends to be low in people who suffer from depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Sarang & Telles, 2006; Streeter et al., 2007; Streeter et al., 2010).

Neuroscientist Sara Lazar has focused her recent research on how yoga affects the development of subtle cognitive and psychological states. Her work was the first to show that meditation practice can promote plasticity in the area of the brain important for cognitive and emotional processing. This neuroplasticity is the way in which our brain and nervous system can actually be changed by experience (Lazar et al., 2000). Lazar's

study of MRI brain scans of yoga practitioners showed a thickening of the cortex, an area of the brain thought to be involved in integrating emotional and cognitive processes, in those who meditate (Lazar et al., 2000; Lazar et al., 2002; Lazar et al., 2005). Her study is one of many that further establish how this seemingly simple act of coordinating the body and breath in yoga postures can have a life-altering impact on one's emotional state (D. Khalsa, 2002; S. Khalsa et al., 2008; Uebelacker et al., 2010; van der Kolk, 2010). It was groundbreaking, as previous studies focused only on meditators, whereas the brain scans of yoga practitioners meant that the combination of meditation, movements, and breath were combined.

The research and practice of Dharma Singh Khalsa, a Kundalini Yoga practitioner, involves the meditation techniques utilized in naad yoga, where one employs sound waves and vibrational frequencies to target specific neurotransmitters in the brain, which induce a variety of changes in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual state of the practitioner. This practice of naad yoga, which Khalsa calls "Medical Meditation" is also called Shabd Guru (a quantum technology of sound which directly alters one's consciousness), the root of the practice of Kundalini Yoga as experienced through the sound current of chanting mantras (Bhajan, 2003; D. Khalsa, 2002). The vibrational waves induced by chanting the specific mantras of naad yoga have the power to cut through the negative thought patterns which so often accompany illness and stress disorders, hence triggering the activation of our own natural healing state (D. Khalsa, 2002).

Another pioneer and Kundalini Yoga practitioner within the world of yoga research is Sat Bir Singh Khalsa. He founded the first Symposium on Yoga Research in

2010 and has been conducting basic and clinical research that centers on the effectiveness of yoga and meditation practices (S. Khalsa, 2004, 2006; S. Khalsa et al., 2008). He is currently conducting clinical research trials examining and evaluating the role of yoga as a therapeutic treatment for conditions such as posttraumatic stress, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, further uncovering how this ancient spiritual somatic practice impacts the practitioner on both a physiological and psychological level (S. Khalsa, 2004).

Yoga offers a range of therapeutic benefits: interoceptive awareness, greater focus, relaxation of body and mind. Some identified benefits of yoga include increased body awareness, deeper relaxation of the mind and body, centering of attention, sharpening of concentration, as well as heightened compassion, connection, and positive perceptions towards oneself and others (Arpita, 1990; Baptiste, 2002; Iyengar, Evans, & Abrams, 2005; Schell, Allolio, & Schonecke, 1994). Yoga is also purported to increase self-awareness and self-regulation, interoceptive awareness, proprioception, and connectedness to the body, somatic states, and surrounding environment (Baptiste, 2002; Iyengar et al., 2005).

Research that considers the health benefits of yoga is quickly growing and evolving. Numerous physical, physiological, biochemical, and psychological benefits have been documented (S. Khalsa, 2004). The psychological benefits are varied, and might include increases in somatic and kinesthetic awareness, mood, self-acceptance, social adjustment, psychomotor functioning, and cognitive functioning (Arpita, 1990, Impett, Daubenmier & Hirschman, 2006; Murphy & Donovan, 1997; Sahu & Bhole, 1983; Schell et al., 1994; Streeter et al., 2007, 2010).

Other recent studies have also linked the practice of yoga to the alleviation of mental health problems, including anxiety and depression (Bennett, Weintraub, & S. Kalsa, 2008; Campbell & Moore, 2004; Forbes et al., 2008; Lavey et al., 2005; Pilkington, Kirkwood, Rampes, & Richardson, 2005). Such studies acknowledge the potential of yoga as a therapeutic intervention. Some studies have found that a regular yoga practice can be equally, if not more effective, than traditional therapy and medications. Granath and colleagues (2006) compared cognitive behavior therapy with a Kundalini Yoga program by randomly assigning 26 women and seven men into one of the two groups, each of which consisted of 10 sessions over 4 months. Significant improvements on psychological self-reports (stress, exhaustion, quality of life) and physiological measurements (blood pressure, heart rate) were noted from pre- to post-treatment in both groups, and no significant differences were found between the groups. These results indicate that regular practice of yoga was as effective in treating stress as cognitive behavior therapy (Granath, Ingvarsson, von Thiele, & Lundberg, 2006). Additionally, in a randomized 3-month controlled trial, Sahasi and colleagues (1989) found that yoga was more effective than diazepam in treating anxiety, as measured by the Institute for Personality and Ability Testing anxiety scale (Sahasi, Mohan, & Kacker, 1989).

A significant body of literature has also begun to systematically study the impact of yoga on particular aspects of well-being (Arpita, 1990; Bennett et al., 2008; Murphy & Donovan, 1997; Schell et al., 1994). Impett and colleagues (2006) explored the relationship between yoga practice, well being, and mind-body connection. They found positive correlations between yoga practice and embodiment (body awareness and

responsiveness), positive affect, and satisfaction with life (Impett, Daubenmier, & Hirschman, 2006). The Kripalu Institute of Extraordinary Living Research has begun a pioneering research project. They are examining the effects of regular yoga practice and meditation on the structure of the brain.

Yoga aims to develop a strong and calm body that is here and now. This helps reestablish a sense of time and being present (rather than dissociation). Relaxation and breathing help calm a person who is experiencing anxiety, and the emphasis on self-acceptance is important for those who lack a sense of self-love (van der Kolk, 2006). Such practice encourages heightened awareness of one's present moment, attending to emotions and internal experience, and experiencing the moment in a non-judgmental manner, thereby building a foundation to engage more fully in life (Follette & Pistorello, 2007). Yoga has been thought to assist in adjusting to life's difficulties or becoming free of symptoms, and it may also promote positive development, personal growth, and empowerment (Singh, 1986).

I am motivated and inspired by these trailblazing researchers, who have contributed to a worldwide evolution in further understanding the body mind, the nature of consciousness, and their role in healing trauma and transforming life. I am also motivated by what they haven't yet done.

> Yoga research in general is primarily focused on the benefits of the components of Yoga practice studied in isolation from each other: the breathing, the poses, the meditation. However, the whole is undoubtedly greater than the sum of its parts. (D'Brant, 2010, p. 23)

I intend to further describe the benefits of the totality of the yoga experience in contrast to only examining its individual components.

## Summary

To summarize, researchers have been finding that trauma survivors often live and experience their world in a body that continues to replay memories of past trauma (van der Kolk, 2009). This leaves the individual living in the aftermath of trauma to struggle with her current, present moment experiences (van der Kolk, 2006). Yoga aims to develop a heightened awareness of the present moment, where one is able to calmly attend to internal experiences and build a foundation for growing, connecting, and engaging in life (Follette & Pistorello, 2007; van der Kolk, 2006). Along with reestablishing a sense of presence, the practitioner gains tools, such as breathing and meditation, to gain a calming clarity from which to consciously take effective action. This practice also offers an emphasis on acceptance of oneself and one's life experience (van der Kolk, 2006).

The next chapter moves from what was covered here to the literature of phenomenology, both as philosophy and as method, then goes into more specifics about the methods for this study on the lived outcomes of 12 participants' experience of healing trauma through Kundalini Yoga. It attempts to bridge the gaps in the literature, as mentioned above, and to further the knowledge about Kundalini Yoga as a healing modality for trauma and life toolset for growth and transformation.

# CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## Confluence of Yoga and Phenomenology

> As human beings we have the beneficial capacity of conceptualization. It has allowed us to conceptually invent and interpret everything we encounter in our lives. We see our phenomenal world by choice – by how we choose to interpret and receive it. We conceptualize our experiences. But what do we do when we feel safer and more comfortable in the psychology of the concept than we do in the embodiment of the experience? What does it feel like to experience the experience? (Guru Singh, Master Kundalini Yoga Teacher, class lecture, October 20, 2008)

It was after hearing these words of my teacher that I took a conscious step out of the self-sabotaging conceptual perceptions of my Self and onto the yoga mat to experience the experience of being me, being me in the world, and to experience the embodiment and flow of my consciousness. In the process of pursuing my doctorate, I found a research approach that has done for me what yoga has done for me: peel away layers and layers of my preconceived notions, conceptions, assumptions, and beliefs, and provide me with an opening to delve deeper, in order to experience the true nature and essence of my Being, continually unfolding and in flux. I found a research approach that uncovered the richness and depths of this spiritual somatic practice, going where quantitative studies are unable to go. I found a research approach that allowed me to capture the uniquely individual, in-depth experiential, and process-orientated nature of the practice of Kundalini Yoga.

The studies conducted in the domains of trauma, yoga, physiology, and neuroscience have produced results thus far that support HOW and WHY the practice of yoga heals trauma. But WHAT is the experience? The scientists, neurobiologists, and psychiatrists researching yoga have provided an opening for the phenomenologist to step in. Phenomenology offers both the theoretical framework and practical approach to uncover the "what" of the phenomenon, to fill in the knowledge gaps and better inform scientific studies by directing attention to the essence of somatic experience. "When combined, the insights of phenomenological inquiry and the results of empirical studies offer a fuller and richer understanding of the phenomenon under consideration" (Rehorick & Nugent, 2008, p. 34). In their phenomenological approach to deepening their understanding of what constitutes the essence of male experiences of pregnancy, Rehorick and Nugent went where limited empiricists could not go.

> It is not the concept itself, however, but an un-packaging of the meaning of such conceptions that can help us understand what "couvade" is. In this vein, research approaches such as phenomenology treat conceptions such as "compathy" as opening to in-depth inquiry rather than as explanatory closings. (Rehorick & Nugent, 2008, p.45)

Phenomenologists explore beyond the concepts and into the experience. That is where yoga and phenomenology meet.

As a yogi, in phenomenology I found my scholar-practitioner home away from home. In yoga, the practitioner commits to stripping away the layers of noise (opinions, assumptions, preconceptions) in order to come to quiet, and connect to and experience "the thing itself"—that thing being one's true, authentic state of being (Bhajan, 1997,

2003). For a practicing yogi who believes that the core of understanding is in the experiencing, phenomenology has proven to be a refreshing way of doing research. "Phenomenology does not explain, but rather it creates understanding among the set of observers and observed" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 100). My research intention throughout this study was to remain as near to experience as I could. Phenomenological methods supported my scholar-practitioner purpose by providing substantive techniques to record the essence of an experience as it was unfolding (Bentz & Rehorick, 2008; van Manen, 1997).

Phenomenological research provides methods for qualitative inquiry, a discipline for sorting and interpreting subjective accounts, and an intellectual tradition that reveals meaning so as to contribute to scholarship. "In the words of Merleau-Ponty (1962), science is a 'second order expression of the world' that is founded on the first order of how we directly experience the world" (Bentz & Rehorick, 2008, p. ix). Phenomenologists seek to capture, catalog, and interpret the lived experience (Wagner, 1983). While no words can replace the experience, the phenomenologist starts with the things themselves, attempting to capture a clear and rich description as a foundation for interpretation and analysis of the experience (Heidegger, 1962).

Phenomenological research is primarily achieved by engaging and connecting with human beings to uncover the essential features of one's conscious experience with a particular life phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In order for the phenomenolgist to reveal acts of experience, Alfred Schutz (1970) explained how she must separate the personal self from her streams of thoughts and feelings and turn herself in a specific act of reflection towards her own experiences (pp. 56-58). He reminded us

of our intentionality of consciousness, and our need to bracket or suspend our beliefs, judgments, opinions, and assumptions of the outer world in order to truly access our experience "in its absolute uniqueness of nature" (Schutz, 1970, p. 59).

James Morley (2008) took note of the remarkable congruence between phenomenology and yoga through his application of the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to this ancient spiritual somatic practice. Morley stated how any comparisons between yoga and phenomenology must be based in the concrete. We must experience the experience devoid of abstractions and intellectual concepts, in order to embrace and understand it.

The yogi and the phenomenologist walk a shared path: complementing, enriching, and informing each other's worlds. Yoga, like phenomenology, is about renewing connection to that "always already-ness." Merleau-Ponty said that through phenomenology "to return to the things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge" (1962, p. ix), "the world that is always 'already there' before reflection begins" (1962, p. vii). That, to me, defines the essence of the practice of yoga and meditation—that path towards heightened consciousness and expanded awareness where true healing and transformation occurs. In Kundalini Yoga, through its science of breath and movement, the practitioner aims to create a natural state of stillness and clarity called shuniya. Shuniya is that "zero point," or original point of neutrality preceding all that is (Bhajan, 2003, p. 91). It is beyond fitting that I should use this dissertation as an opportunity to bridge these two realms, as they are currently woven into the fabric of my life. Both have guided me to uncover and recover the essential structures of my experiences, awakening and heightening the essence of my consciousness.

**Pilot Study**

I conducted a small pilot study for which I received IRB approval. The pilot study was put in place for me to test my proposed phenomenological research methodology and method. I stepped into the pilot with a clear understanding that there is no single phenomenological method, and that my way of doing phenomenology for the purposes of this study would present itself once I was experiencing it in practice. Just as we must "do yoga" in order to "be yoga," it is in the doing of phenomenology that the researcher comes to understand it (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology is also the language of being. In order to do phenomenology, you must become a phenomenologist. "Being a phenomenologist is a unique way of being-in-the-world that involves releasing assumptions about the world and engaging directly, mindfully, and fully with whatever is before us" (Simpson, 2008, p. 62).

My pilot study goal was to determine whether the phenomenological interview process I had designed would produce rich descriptions of the participant's lived experience of healing trauma through her committed practice of Kundalini Yoga. I set out to test whether my participant's descriptions would enable me to identify and analyze themes to support my gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. For the pilot study, rather than narrowing down to a single question, I focused on three questions that only later in the process of the dissertation became the single research question. These were as follows: *What is the experience of practicing and training in Kundalini Yoga? What happens within that experience that is healing? What is the experience of healing trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga?*

My personal post-pilot study process, during and after re-working interview questions, recognizing my empathic way of being, maintaining a neutral, curious space during the interviews, and noticing where I unconsciously imposed my preconceptions into the first run of my analysis, was a humbling experience for me. I recognized my heavy presence during the pilot interview. This led to my revisiting my questions and stripping them down to key queries, followed by simple "How?" and "What was that like?" prompts to clarify. I experienced a huge difference between my pilot and the interviews I conducted thereafter. In the latter, I made a conscious effort to actively listen and maintain a 90% interviewee, 10% interviewer dynamic during the exchange, creating far less of me and more of them.

During the pilot, I was also reminded of how the interview process was not a clinical intervention or counseling session. My nature and my yoga therapy work tend to leave me open to engaging in that empathic way, and I was clear after the pilot how I was not there in the interviews to be a counselor. It was refreshing to witness and experience the shifts in the later interviews, as I became very conscious of holding a supportive heart-space (that is who I am), but refraining from pouring my heart into it. This taught me so much about conscious, active listening. What a lesson.

I learned to be very cognizant of my enthusiastic tendency (experienced during the pilot analysis) to jump ahead of my Self and the data and into concepts. My journaling throughout the interview process really helped in providing me a space to pour out my expectations and personal assumptions and preconceptions regarding what I know and have experienced of Kundalini Yoga and healing MY trauma. I recognized (and journaled about) how my passion and enthusiasm for this spiritual somatic practice had

me jumping ahead during my pilot interpretation and into the concepts I am familiar with. Feedback from my committee reeled me back in. My continued journaling throughout the data collection and analysis (after taking field notes and during data analysis) continued to offer a space to bring awareness to and bracket my pre-conceptions.

The pilot study gave me the priceless opportunity to test out my interview guide (tweaking it where it was needed) and test out my interview skills. I was also able to test out my reflective ability and experience a hermeneutic phenomenological method in action as I did my first run of the data analysis. The data obtained and the lessons learned from this pilot interview experience added fuel to my fired-up purpose and goal to obtain rich, valuable information about lived experience of the practice of Kundalini Yoga.

I think it helped that I chose to create space between my pilot study and the other interviews. During that time, per my committee's guidance, I really reviewed and meditated on my needing to step back and allow my participants to share their world with me—to allow more pause and space between—offering them the time and space to respond and describe, and to allow them to lead me. Again, it was a humbling experience getting out of my own way during the pilot study, and continued to be throughout the entire data analysis process.

**Participant Selection**

> Healed human beings stand tall as examples for others. Nobody can belittle the life of a healed healer. The human being who has authentically healed his or her past has an unshakable, intimate knowing of the value contained in the journey of healing the self and in the bravery required of all spiritual warriors. (Sams & Nitsch, 1991, p. 17)

"Meaning and understanding of a phenomenon of study is gathered most effectively through the examination and interpretation by the practitioners themselves" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). **"**The basic datum of phenomenology is the conscious human being" (p. 98). With that in mind, I believe some of the most striking and validating findings are practitioners' own descriptions of how they have healed their lives through their yoga and meditation practice. Phenomenological research is primarily achieved by engaging and connecting with human beings to uncover the essential features of one's conscious experience with a particular life phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). This study protocol involved a study sample of yoga practitioners who have lived through and have been healing through past trauma. It looked at their trauma recovery process through their experience of the practice of Kundalini Yoga. Based on this general focus, the selection criteria were stated specifically, as follows:

1. Male and female practitioners, 20 years and older, who had committed to a daily practice (Sadhana) of Kundalini Yoga for a minimum of 9 months.
2. Yoga practitioners who had experienced life-changing trauma in the past.

In using these selection criteria, I found that all of the participants in this study shared one other commonality. Each had committed to and completed the 9-month Level 1 Kundalini Yoga and Meditation Teacher Training Program.

Before conducting this study and delving into the participant selection, I received approval from Fielding Graduate University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), just as I had for the pilot study. "The IRB is a committee charged with the oversight of all social behavioral and education research with human subjects (research participants) conducted

at Fielding to ensure that research participants' rights are adequately protected" (Fielding Graduate University website). The IRB process established the essential presence of and mindful reflection on research ethics as the bedrock of the study. As a scholar practitioner, I did not take this lightly. Throughout the study I adhered to the ethical principles of informed consent, right to privacy (which included confidentiality and anonymity), and protection from harm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I connected with my study participants (fellow yoga practitioners and teachers) through the yoga community at large (various Kundalini Yoga classes, retreats, and workshops). I was fortunate not to have to go through an extensive recruiting process. I did not extensively advertise the study beyond word of mouth, and discovered several of my study participants through a snowball technique (through co-practitioners and teachers). Practitioners in the yoga community who heard about my research interests voluntarily approached me and shared their interest in getting involved in the study because of their past experience of trauma recovery and yoga. My research participants were co-practitioners and teachers I was indirectly acquainted with or generally knew of through the Kundalini Yoga community. For those who didn't already know the details and purpose of the study, an introductory email/letter was sent out for recruitment (Appendix E). For those practitioners who did not meet the inclusion criteria, I sent out an explanatory Exclusion/ Thank You email/letter (Appendix F).

Because the participants shared their personal and sensitive stories and experiences linked to past traumas and how they were healing through them, I was aware of the possibility that they may have experienced some stress and emotional discomfort during or after the participation. I minimized the risk of stress and emotional discomfort

by informing each participant beforehand of every step in the procedure process, so that they knew what to expect, as well as by making myself available to process and discuss their reactions during the data-collection process. They were also informed throughout the study that they could stop their involvement at any time. In addition, I was ready to provide them with a list of referrals for therapists should they have wished to seek that assistance. No one did.

I believe the benefits of being involved in this study far outweighed the risks. These participants survived trauma and found a somatic practice that helped them alleviate the emotional, psychological stresses and discomforts they experienced in their lives, and they wished to share their experience at the risk of experiencing further discomfort and stress. Sharing their experiences of trauma and healing, and the sense of empowerment and gratitude they connected to through their participation, outweighed the potential difficulties of having to relive tender parts of their stories. Most of the study participants expressed a sense of greater personal awareness (empowerment and gratitude) through their reflection process (recognizing how far they had come), as well as a sense of altruism and *seva* (benevolent, selfless service) in knowing their participation in the research study may ultimately support and promote this spiritual somatic practice so others may benefit from it as well.

**Data Collection/Gathering**

The data collection method must be one that is best suited to invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). I set out to have my co-researchers tell their stories, providing me with data that was rooted in direct, embodied inner experience. This

enabled me as phenomenological researcher to capture, catalog, and interpret their lived experience. As part of my design approach, I conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews. My goal was to elicit rich testimonies of my participants' lived experiences of the practice of Kundalini Yoga and meditation through open-ended questions via a safe, supportive discourse (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

During the interview process, I had a list of questions on hand (Appendix A) in case the study participant needed further support to gradually, thoughtfully, and appropriately move from a superficial to a more in-depth disclosure, thereby allowing for a naturally unfolding, emergent quality to the interviewing process. I sent out letters/emails of introduction or invitation (Appendix B) to each participant, along with the necessary informed consent form (Appendix C). I also scheduled an introductory phone call to offer an explanation and discussion of my study and how the interviews would be conducted (one-on-one, digitally recorded conversations).

The participants' confidentiality and anonymity was protected through the use of pseudonyms, as well as the possibility of any participant's choice to withdraw from the research project at any time. I was well aware of the ethical issues involved in dealing with human subjects. Recognizing the delicate and sensitive subject matter of my interviews, I informed each potential participant of the research procedures on the phone prior to their consent. I discussed the types of questions they would be asked and the potentiality of the process being difficult and emotional. There was also a textual reference to these ethical concerns in the consent form.

The recruitment of the participants and data collection involved digital recordings and email. My correspondence with my participants was through some email

communication, which was kept strictly confidential. All written correspondences were stored in a locked email and computer file, only accessible by password. The data collection process involved digital recordings. The digital recordings were listened to and coded only by myself, and listened to and transcribed by a confidential Research Assistant/Transcriber who had signed the attached Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement (Appendix D). Upon completion of each transcription, a copy was made and sent to the participant to verify correctness. All media material has been stored in a locked computerized database (secured with a password). Any records that would identify any participant in this study, such as informed consent forms and email correspondences, have been stored in locked digital files and will be destroyed 5 years after the study is completed.

The phenomenological interview is characterized by mutual trust, care, and respect between the interviewer and the interviewee, sharing a commitment to dive deep into experience in search of deeper understanding (Massarik, 1981, 1985). In order to dive deeply, I knew I would need to foster a safe and supportive environment of exploration and discovery between us. The space and place for this informal, yet intensive process would have to provide privacy and comfort for both myself and the participant. My home was the setting for five of my participant interviews. I held the interview in the same space in which I see my private clients: on the couch in my cozy and quiet living room, with the faint sound of a Kundalini mantra playing in the background. Another five of the interviews were conducted in the comfort of the participants' homes. One interview was conducted at a local café down the street from a participant's home, and only one interview was conducted over the phone. Each

participant had already read and signed the consent form, but I took the time at the beginning of our meeting to walk each participant through what to expect of the interview process and interview questions, and reminded each of them of the freedom to stop the interview at any time.

Before diving into the interview, I guided each participant through a short meditation and pranayam (focused breathing exercise), offering her or him the opportunity to focus on her or his breath and notice any tension s/he may be feeling in her or his body. After the long, deep breathing we tuned in with the Adi Mantra and the Mangala Charan Mantra (two mantras we chant in Kundalini Yoga before we begin our practice or journey inward). The pranayam and chanting supported an inner space of stillness, courage, and clarity from which to access lived experience. After the meditative pranayam and chanting I consciously guided them through the questions.

The first half of my questioning was set up to elicit descriptions of the participants' experience of trauma. I guided and probed when I felt they needed some help to expand and go deeper. I also sustained a supportive, nurturing space (through non-verbal communication and verbal validation) when I experienced them accessing heavy emotions. The second half of the interview focused on questions that elicited how the participant experienced the Kundalini Yoga practice, the healing, and the changes in her Self, her relationships, and her world. My intention was to support the participants in guiding me through their lifeworlds and lived experience (their history, their view, their experience as described by them). I understand lived experience as "the direct feelings, thoughts, and bodily awareness of actual life," and hence, I consciously remained

committed to guiding each one deeper into her or his description of her or his experience (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, p. 3).

I had my interview guide (of questions) there in front of me should I need to refer to them, and found that the shared dialogue (their describing and my interjecting minimally with a question like, *"What was that like? Can you describe the experience*?") had an organic quality, taking the bends and turns I had anticipated when I had initially designed my stream of questions.

After journeying back to how the participant felt and experienced her Self and her life today, I closed the interview process with a closing meditation/prayer and pranayam to reground each participant after such an intense journey. I followed our closing prayer by asking how each participant experienced the interview process and whether there was anything else she'd like to share. When there was nothing more to add, we moved into discussing what would happen from there. I reviewed the next steps with them all: (a) having the interview transcribed, (b) checking in during the following week to provide them with an opportunity to add to and clarify what had been shared and transcribed, (c) agreeing on a pseudonym, and (d) offering to provide a summary of the study results once it was completed.

**Data Analysis**

My methodological orientation (informed by the pilot) blended the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, the hermeneutic theory of Hans-Gorg Gadamer, and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach of Max van Manen. I followed Husserl's descriptive eidetic method (involving bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing) to uncover essential

structures and develop phenomenological descriptions. Edmund Husserl asserted that knowledge of the structures of consciousness and essences of a phenomenon would only be possible by bracketing all assumptions about the existence of the external, taken-for-granted world (Ricoeur, 1967).

Bracketing is a way of allowing things to enter into consciousness as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). I consciously and continually committed to setting aside and bracketing my presuppositions, insights, and lessons from my own lived experience of the practice of Kundalini Yoga and meditation. My approach to the data analysis maintained this phenomenological attitude of bracketing personal experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions as I read and reread transcribed texts, distilled experiential accounts to major themes, constructed the textures and structures of experiences, and described the meanings and essences of them (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Gadamer, 1998; Husserl, 1997).

Phenomenology requires the researcher to become immersed with the data. Hence, I read the transcripts over several times. In my first analysis, I reread the printed transcripts to familiarize myself with the participant responses. I used margin notes during my analysis of themes, patterns, descriptors, and personal qualities, and assigned certain codes, which I used in the second analysis of the interviews. In the next level of analysis, I gathered the descriptive terms and determined the linkages, and searched for recurring themes in my participants' accounts. "Themes are usually expressed as phrases which speak to the psychological essence of the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 92). For the third level of analysis, I scanned the data and codes, and constructed

structures with descriptors that fell into certain categories, uncovering and interpreting the essence of their experience. I also looked for patterns across my participants' transcribed accounts, tracking reoccurrences of key emergent themes for the entire sample group (Smith et al., 2009). I worked through these levels of analysis within a hermeneutic circle, dynamically moving between the part and whole (Gadamer, 1976; Moustakas, 1994; Palmer, 1988; Ricoeur, 1967; Taylor, 1971).

After I received the transcripts from my transcriptionist, I waited a few days in order to create some more space between the interview process and the analysis. Hermeneutics, as the art of interpretation and understanding, uncovers and supports deeper understanding of the intention and meaning behind the appearances of the text (Gadamer, 1998; van Manen, 1997, 2002). When the space was created, I was ready and open for the text to reveal itself. Before I took my first turn at the analysis I did a short pranayam and meditation (a yogi's version of bracketing) in order to settle myself into that space of shuniya: that neutral zero point, where I stood aware of my baggage of pre-conceived notions and assumptions. In the epoché process, everyday understandings are set aside. I settled myself into experiencing the practice of Kundalini Yoga for the first time.

My intention behind my data analysis was to get to the essence of my question (*What are the lived outcomes experienced by practitioners who claim healing of personal trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga?*) by describing what appeared before me and how it appeared through my participants' descriptions of their lived experiences. With as much clarity and openness as possible, I took a turn at phenomenological reduction: to let each text reveal itself to me, "to let the things speak for themselves" and

to attend to the phenomenon as it appeared (van Manen, 1997). My first-order analysis was used to explicate meaning statements that appeared readily in the text, simply observing and seeing the lived descriptions that emerged across the data.

My first turn at the data uncovered those meaning statements I gleaned from the participants' actual lived descriptions that I had initially categorized into topic words on the margins and then on a separate sheet of paper. I then took another turn at the data that involved analyzing the text for more meaningful themes while interacting reflectively with the text. At this point I allowed my own sense of what was significant in the data to come into conscious awareness. The themes emerged across several broad categories, describing the meanings the participants experienced through their trauma, Kundalini Yoga practice and healing. I was amazed and moved at the way the themes would themselves ask for my attention.

After defining themes through this spiraling process of analysis I began to experience Gadamer's fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1998; Ricouer, 1981). Allowing each text to interact with me and my own lived experience, through this reflexive technique I found new concepts coming to light and validation of the participants' experience. I found myself spiraling into a hermeneutic circle of moving back and forth between my own experience and the data, further deepening my knowing and understanding of the experience of the practice of Kundalini Yoga on one's healing journey. The following sections describe the four steps of my analysis process in greater detail.

**First step: épochè and bracketing.** In a Husserlian approach, this is the first step in getting back to "the things themselves." Here I needed to suspend my

preassumptions, biases, and preconceptions that “predispose” me to interpret the nature of the Kundalini Yoga experience before it presented itself to me. In this process, I needed to see with a new pair of eyes. To do this, I chose to bracket my assumptions, as described earlier, suspending my attachment to what I have experienced, while diving or free falling into the durée of the experience described in the text in front of me. This first step of reflective activity mirrors the yogic state of *nirodha* where the practitioner aims to create a state of suspension of all feeling and perception (Easwaran, 2007; Philips, 2009). I chose to come to each text attending to the lifeworld of each participant through their concrete examples of experience.

In my way of being and understanding, this is a meditation: creating space and distance between me and my experiences and assumptions, acknowledging their presence but neither assisting nor resisting them. Meditation, for me, is the process of mastering and transcending the waves of my mind, by pushing aside the ego, and leaving its world of space and time behind. I am floating along my stream of consciousness, cleansing my mind of all thoughts and feelings that "wax and wane," tuning into the Infinite continuous flow. Of course, I can only make meaning of this meditative experience through the clarity of my reflection.

**Second step: phenomenological reduction.** Once I entered this meditative state to come to the description in front of me with new eyes, I moved into attending to the phenomena of experiences in front of me as they appeared, describing, rather than explaining them. I focused on the descriptions as they showed themselves, horizonalizing or equalizing all that was showing up (Moustakas, 1988). Horizonalization is the process of identifying every statement or phrase that may

relevantly clarify the nature of the lived outcome of the experience of Kundalini Yoga. As Moustakas (1994) stated,

> Each horizon as it comes into our conscious experience is the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character. We consider each of the horizons and the textural qualities that enable us to understand an experience. (p. 95)

While giving the participants' richly described statements equal value, I sifted through and determined whether the statement (e.g., "Through conscious breathing, I am able to come back to the present moment") contained a piece of the experience that was essential for understanding it. From there, I further determined whether the textual description (the participants' described words) could be abstracted and made into a structural description or invariant component (e.g., agency to take effective action).

The purpose and aim of this step is to explicate the essential nature of the lived outcome of Kundalini Yoga experience as described by the participants in this study. I first described and coded things (descriptions) as they appeared, then moved onto reducing and peeling away at the themes that emerged. I looked for meaning units/statements of their experience and then clustered the relatable meaning statements and coded them together under a thematic label. I continued this process of grouping or clustering related meaning statements and took another moment to breathe.

While it seems to move against one's ordinary way of being in the world, phenomenological reduction is actually a heightening of the experiencer's presence to the activity of consciousness. It's not about forgetting the past, but about not letting our past knowledge be engaged while determining the mode and content of the present experience

(Giorgi, 2009, p. 92). It reminds us to be attentively present, instead of habitually present (Giorgi, p. 92). "The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (Merleau Ponty, 1962, p. xiv).

**Third step: imaginative variation.** This process gave me an opportunity to discover possible meanings by embracing the phenomenon from different perspectives. I found this to be a liberating process, engaging my imagination to run wild with possibilities, and honing it back in with intuitive knowing. In imaginative variation, the researcher moves from observing to actively investigating to explore the essential features of the phenomena by varying possible meanings (Moustakas, 1988, p. 92). This is done to conceptually clarify the essence of the phenomenon. If it is impossible to imagine a phenomenal example without a particular characteristic, then that characteristic is essential. "Knowing an essence involves conceptually clarifying the invariant characteristics and structure evident in a virtually limitless multiplicity of possible exemplifications" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 127).

Giorgi (2009) stated that an active imagination is helpful when trying to discover the essence of a phenomenon or attempting to clarify the meaning structure of an experience. It requires that one mentally remove an aspect of the phenomenon that is to be clarified in order to see whether the removal transforms what is presented in an essential way (Giorgi, p. 69). The goal is "to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (van Manen, 1997, p. 107).

After dwelling in, meditating, loving, and hating the transcribed data and the meaning statements that emerged and presented themselves to me from my participants'

descriptions of their lived experience, I whittled the clustered relatable meaning statements into core themes that constituted essential descriptions of their experience. My experience of doing this was that themes would jump out, wake me up, and interrupt me while I was eating.

**Fourth step: synthesis, finding, and explicating themes.** This step involved my determining the significant statements from the transcribed interviews that offered themes of the embodied descriptions of participants' lived experience. It was an "intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). After the descriptions were organized into themes, I synthesized them all into an interpretative outline. By offering an extensive outlined description of what appeared and was given to me, I explicated the essential nature of Kundalini Yoga, explaining how Kundalini Yoga is healing and transformative.

The essences referred to in this study are only one interpretation, a reflection of one individual researcher, from my vantage point during this time. The purpose of this methodology is not to achieve a consensus or to determine the "correct" description of an experience, but to raise consciousness and open a dialogue on the subject that exposes the diversity of potential experience.

***Data validity.*** Having said this, the process of validation, which involves including my participants in reviewing the description of the experience, pushed this one interpretation to a point where the description could include my own experience, as well as those of the participants in this study. Thus, while there may not be a "correct"

description, there is one that illumines the essences of this experience in a way that is recognizable to those who have experienced it.

In phenomenological research, when the research description brings to life the essence of the phenomenon, the research is complete. "The final criterion for the validity of the research is the clarity of insight so that others will also recognize the description as a statement of the phenomenon's essence" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 45). Polkinghorne identified four criteria necessary and sufficient for the descriptive statement to be valid: vividness, accuracy, richness, and elegance (Polkinghorne, 1983 pp. 45-46). Polkinghorne's understanding of the importance of these criteria is further described by phenomenologist Linda Finlay in this way:

> Is the research vivid in the sense that it generates a sense of reality and draws the reader in? Are readers able to recognise [sic] the phenomenon from their own experience or from imagining the situation vicariously? In terms of richness, can readers enter the account emotionally? Finally, has the phenomenon been described in a graceful, clear, poignant way?" (2006, p. 35)

In a phenomenological study such as this one, validation of claims about meanings and understandings of human experience require proof or evidence through rich descriptions in everyday language via analyses using such methods as epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis in order to capture the essential structures across individual experiences. My intention has been to draw the reader into these discoveries through me and my participants, offering an opportunity to capture and experience the richness and ambiguity of the lived experience resulting from the committed practice of Kundaini Yoga in a deeper way.

**Reflexive Journal**

As a phenomenological researcher, I am aware of the need for self-reflection. An integral part of the research process was the maintenance of my research journal. It was a valuable source of data for this study. I poured all my thoughts, feelings, notes, ideas, moods, and other influences that I thought would be instrumental in my engagement with the research into the journal.

Directly after the interviews I took field notes to capture the experience. I described and included information on where and when the interview took place, and my observations and experiences of the participant (i.e., her body language, the changes in the tone of her voice, and how she expressed her thoughts and feelings). I then wrote in my personal journal, delving into my personal experience and my reflections on the interview.

For example, after one interview I wrote about how I found myself being mindful of this notion of letting go of control and surrendering to the process, allowing her to offer up the rich descriptions of her lived experience. I also journaled about the moment during an interview when I noticed my self-critic step in, questioning whether I could successfully conduct an interview and whether my guidance and questioning would elicit deep, rich descriptions of her experience. In addition, I wrote about the overwhelming feeling of gratitude and awe I was experiencing in having been privy to these heroic journeys of healing, and felt beyond blessed to be given the opportunity to continue to learn and grow personally through the gift of these lived stories.

**Research Preconceptions**

In any qualitative study, it is essential for the researcher to be aware of his or her assumptions: the lenses through which she is viewing the evolving data, particularly in a constructivist epistemology, which holds that each person brings a unique perspective and that there is no one reality. My assumptions are as follows:

1. I personally experienced Kundalini Yoga as healing and transformative, and hence believe it to be a valid and powerful approach to healing and transformation.
2. Traumatic memories are "held" in the tissues of the body and somatic work can be powerfully effective in accessing them, working through feelings and examining the beliefs attached to them in light of the individual's current life and resources.
3. Body, mind, spirit are connected.
4. Crisis/trauma is disconnection from self, other, and Spirit (oneness).
5. We experience our reality through our body, as vessel. Healing and transformative work MUST include somatic work, must include the body in order to learn to re-inhabit oneself instead of dissociate.

**Summary**

To review, phenomenology aims to uncover the essential meanings (or invariant structures) of individual experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). Its aim is "to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (van Manen, 1997, p. 107). This phenomenological study was designed to uncover and understand the nature of the

lifeworld of Kundalini Yoga practitioners who experienced the healing of personal trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga. As described earlier in this chapter, a phenomenological method was selected as the most appropriate method to approach the research question, *What are the lived outcomes experienced by practitioners who claim healing of personal trauma through the practice of Kundaini Yoga?*

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted as an intimately interactive means from which to render descriptive accounts of experience in order to understand the deep realms of consciousness in the lifeworld of the Kundalini Yoga practitioner. Interview transcripts, field notes, and personal journal entries were analyzed through the in-depth phenomenological analysis process described above. At the very root of phenomenological analysis "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms—to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96).

The next chapter presents a detailed presentation and analysis of the essential structures gleaned from the participants' embodied descriptions of their lived outcomes experienced through the healing of personal trauma as a result of the practice of Kundalini Yoga. The findings that emerged from these descriptions "in their own terms" help reveal the (hidden) universal essence of the nature of this experience.

# CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANTS, DATA, AND THEMES

Kundalini Yoga is the yoga of awareness, and fittingly, the theme of awareness was a concept that pervaded all of the data as each theme reflected increased awareness. The essential structures of this phenomenal experience offered a richer and deeper understanding of the lived outcome of healing through Kundalini Yoga, and how that experience of healing transformed the practitioners and their lifeworld from living in a place of fear and uncertainty to living in Awareness, in Dharma.

What is presented here are the coded terms I determined most relevantly and significantly characterized the first-order constructs that were gleaned from the participants' embodied descriptions or meaning statements. The back-and-forth, meditative journey from the meaning statements that were gleaned from the participants' embodied descriptions, to the themes (or typifications of their typifications), provided a spiraled path that led me through a synthesis of the meanings and essences. It was through the synthesis of uncovering the structural descriptions presenting how the Kundalini Yoga experience is healing and transformative that these essences or six themes of Awareness found their way to me.

Evidence of these themes is presented through excerpts of the participants' lived and embodied descriptions. However, before diving into the rich descriptions of the lived outcomes of the Kundalini Yoga experience, my participants were asked to share and describe their past trauma as a way to contextualize how that trauma impacted their personhood and livelihood before they started their Kundalini Yoga practice. Hence, I begin with exploration of the essential structures that expressed the participants' living in

the aftermath of trauma before having pulled out their yoga mats and meditation cushions and stepping into the world of Kundalini Yoga and Meditation.

After presenting the disruptive effects of dealing with and living in the aftermath of trauma, I present the embodied, resulting experiences of healing trauma through Kundalini. In the words of Amedeo Giorgi (2009), "I want the results to reflect a careful description of precisely the features of the experienced phenomenon as they presented themselves to the consciousness of the researcher" (p.131).

## Introduction of Study Participants

This study examined the lifeworlds of 12 Kundalini Yoga practitioners who claimed to have experienced the healing of personal trauma through the practice and were living a transformed life as a result of it. It looked at life after experiencing the healing of trauma through their experience of the practice of Kundalini Yoga. There were eight female practitioners and four male practitioners who fit the selection criteria. The youngest practitioner was 30 and the oldest practitioner was 62 years of age. All of the practitioners had committed to a consistent and committed practice of Kundalini Yoga for over 9 months, had experienced a life-changing trauma in their past, and claimed having experienced the healing of personal trauma through the practice. While not a required criterion during my search for and selection of participants, I discovered that each of the 12 participants in the study had completed a 9-month Kundalini Yoga Aquarian Teacher training program. Given the importance of maintaining participant confidentiality, attempts have been made to protect participant identities through the use of pseudonyms, which are used throughout this chapter when referring to participants individually.

## Participant Profiles

### Liana

Liana is a 33-year-old Palestinian woman and a thriving jewelry designer with a background in computer engineering. She was raised under the tenets of Palestinian culture, which she experienced as socially repressive to women. She had an abusive childhood, both physically and sexually. This occurred from the beginning of her life (as far back as she can remember) until the age of 23 when she officially left home. As a Palestinian living in America, where the amount of prejudice against Arabs is traumatic in itself, she never felt she fit in on the outside world, nor in the inside world, within her family walls, where her father was abusive, strict, unyielding.

Liana was 29 years old when she started her Kundalini Yoga practice. In and out of disconnected, abusive relationships that mirrored her primary relationships growing up, she felt alone and isolated. Having suffered from chronic anxiety and panic attacks that further fueled fear-induced thoughts and a negative self perception, she stepped into her first Kundalini Yoga class having been merely existing in her life, void of vitality, happiness, and authentic connection with her Self and those around her. If yoga would simply get her "to a place of positivity" that was good enough for her, she explained. It did more than just that. The experience of her committed yoga practice offered a peace of mind, and a peace within her Self. This section of her interview described her experience clearly:

> There is just this feeling of peace. I remember that even though I am in the middle of insanity there is a part of me that goes life goes on. Life not only goes on but who are you going to be in the midst of that? Are you going to be part of the crazy or are you going to separate yourself and go I am OK and this will change. But that was that understanding that we all have suffering and do you turn it against yourself and do you turn it against other people or do you actively

> do something to change that. I don't care where you come from before that point but there is something to be said for getting to that point . . . . Of wanting like to be part of the solution and not the problem and accepting that you're the one responsible for changing your life and that is empowering to be around people who are doing that.

She stated her yoga practice offered her the tools to embody and experience an all-around better feeling of love, gratitude, and peace in her life. She felt happier. She felt more balanced. She felt more grounded and in control, where life had been out of control before. She rarely had panic attacks. She claimed the combination of the yoga, pranayam, and meditations opened and filled her heart with love and gratitude. She felt like she "could float." She stated that the tools which she found most helpful were these: "Long Ek Ong Kars [chanting meditation] were very powerful for me along with the Mul Mantra [another chanting meditation]. I also did the Prosperity meditation a lot." Her Kundalini Yoga experience also re-connected her to her self, her body, and her world: three essential pieces of her life that were painfully absent for so long.

**Greg**

Greg was a successful animator and animation teacher at the time of this study. He was a 50-year-old American man with a Northern European background. He had been divorced for over 20 years and has two children. Greg referred back to several significant traumas in his life. His childhood was colored with the reality of living with an alcoholic mother, and being the victim of bullying from ages 8 to 15 during his school years. As he moved into his adulthood, life as he had known it began to unravel at the age of 25. All in a span of 6 months, Greg's mother died of alcoholism and his father ran off with another woman, emotionally abandoning him. Within months, the mother of his 2-year-old child asked him for a divorce, and Greg lost his job, which forced him to lose his home. Greg's attempts at functioning in the aftermath of his traumas left him

disconnected from himself and his feelings of anger, sadness, and pain. He found himself in and out of unhealthy relationships that only hosted a resurfacing of depression and past pain.

Greg was 45 years old and consumed with anger when he finally stepped into his first Kundalini Yoga class. He shared how he experienced a shedding of anxiety and fear through the kriyas, particularly ones that worked the lower triangle where he was able to release stale anger he was holding in. The kriyas and pranayam got him out of his head and back into his body, and made it physically easier to meditate. Meditation trained and directed his mind away from his obsessive thoughts of the past and the future and back to the present moment. The Kundalini Yoga meditations taught Greg how to live in the present moment and create his own happiness, rather than relying on others to do it for him. The combined effects of the experience of yoga and meditation healed and liberated him from over 20 suffering years of depression. "I do find that Long Ek Ong Kar and the meditation for cold depression in the teacher's training manual are always effective." He went on to express his experience of his healing in this way:

> I have a higher sense of self. I don't get so caught up in my self. I think it's more about losing the self and not being so caught up in you know and I guess that sense of self a lot of it comes from ego and so I stopped giving a fuck about a whole lot of things. There are a lot of things I used to really care about and it's just like it's not important. I am OK with being myself. I am OK with this. One thing I remember and it was somewhere in the middle of teacher training I was asked so how are you feeling in teacher's training. I said you know that feeling when you first fall in love – that feeling of bliss and wholeness? I feel like that all the time. I don't have to have a relationship in order to have that. It's kind of interesting to know that I can create that and that was what I was looking for in a relationship. I was looking for a relationship to provide that and I finally realized I could give it to myself. I guess if you want to call it self-love you can call it that. My whole structure for a relationship has completely changed. Up until yoga I was always looking for a relationship to save me and through that I found a way to save myself.

**Michelle**

Michelle was a 44-year-old, Jewish American woman at the time of this study. She was an inspiring Kundalini Yoga teacher and artist. Michelle grew up in Kentucky with an overdominant, extremely abusive father who would remind her how worthless she was every day. That emotional and verbal abuse was part of her family life. The chaos and pain of her home life led her to her first massively depressive, almost suicidal experience at the age of 15. Michelle ran away from home at 16, moved back, and then left for good when she left for college at 17. She didn't remember the sexual abuse from her childhood until she became sexually active at 21. On a committed road to healing the traumas of her childhood, she experienced another life-shattering trauma at 36 years of age. Michelle's 8-year-old daughter was killed suddenly and violently in an alcohol/drug-related automobile wreck. Michelle experienced a total nervous breakdown and was hospitalized for 17 days. She came very close to dying and was declared permanently disabled. She could not function for years after the accident, and coped with her loss as a permanent feature in her life.

Michelle's first experience of a Kundalini Yoga class was at 37 years of age. A friend practically carried her to class, where she spent the first few months just sobbing on her yoga mat. Her mind, body, and spirit were a devastated wasteland. She specifically remembered the mantra meditation, Kirtan Kriya, reengaging herself with her Self. She felt a regeneration of a shattered brain and broken nervous system. She experienced the pranayam bring blood and oxygen into a body that refused to breathe. The kriyas brought life back into a body that was frozen and shut down.

> I mean yes in a way I have always been that way in like I try to take a shit sandwich and try to do something with it: Maybe bury it so it can grow some food

> later. Whatever, manure. Something. Because there it is and you can't make a shit sandwich into chicken cordon bleu but maybe you can bury it and later get a tomato plant. I have always kind of been like that, and the [Kundalini] practice now, which I only found out after Sammy was killed, you know, has been the guide post – it's been the way to do that with me. The way to go from trauma to dharma. From trauma being like this fate to dharma being my path to destiny. You know when you have nothing left to lose I mean you know being torn apart, torn to shreds you're torn open. Again shit sandwich and it's not fun. I don't recommend it. I don't – I mean I am not made to be like, I am so grateful. I don't know how fucking people do that but I am just not made that way. What I can say is that sucked and I have this. I get this. I have Sam forever. I mean I always did but I know it and we get to know it together. I have hope and I have a purpose. I am a walking testimonial because you know I tell anybody 5 minutes of this and they go, gee what do you do? I say well here's what I do. I say I take Kundalini yoga and it saved me.

The most healing and empowering piece of her experience occurred during the meditations, where she believed she was able to commune with her deceased daughter—having found a way to "meet in the middle." Michelle became a Kundalini Yoga teacher and blogger who lifts others in the same way she was lifted. After spending torturously painful years with no will or desire to live, her dharmic motto became "to love, to serve, to teach, to be." She reported that her teacher "had me do Aad Guray Nameh and pran sutra. He said 'you are going to do this mediation everyday for the rest of your life.'"

**Mitchell**

Mitchell was a 62-year-old American man of Italian heritage at the time of this study. He was divorced with two grown daughters. He owned and ran a well-established construction company. Mitchell's trauma stemmed back to the time around his rather amicable divorce. His oldest daughter (then 16) ran away from home never to be seen or heard from again until 12 years later. Mitchell lived with the harrowing pain of not knowing where his daughter had disappeared to all those years by avoiding and medicating his feelings the only way he knew how: by working and drinking. Already a

workaholic (a reason behind his failing marriage), he threw himself deeper into his work day, and drank his way through the dark nights. This pattern of disconnection left him out of touch with his feelings and unable to express himself.

Mitchell was 58 years old when he was introduced to Kundalini Yoga by his Hatha yoga teacher. Right off the bat he was hooked, claiming he had found that spiritual piece he was missing. Without missing a beat, Mitchell jumped into Kundalini Yoga teacher training and within months discovered an abscess in his throat. This abscess caused a severe throat infection that required his going into emergency surgery, where he almost lost his life. He attributed a huge part of his physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual recovery from his near-death experience in the hospital to his Kundalini Yoga practice. The kriyas strengthened his body, where he experienced personal strength and confidence. He also shared how the different meditations and pranayams healed quite a bit of the painful residue he was still carrying around those empty years separated from his daughter with whom he had since reunited.

> So I was always thinking that unless I did everything right I couldn't share it. When *I* was a kid it was like no you're not sad, no you're not unhappy, no you're not this, just suck it up and this is what's going on. It was that way, "children should be seen and not heard." I have always wanted to open up. I always wanted to speak and get everything out of me that is down there. And through the practice, I have become much more open. It has allowed me to open up my heart. It lets me share more and I am not so worried anymore about what people think. Now it's like these are my feelings and I need to get them out. I need to go back and look at everything and get those feelings out. I am glad to be alive and I think it was like a rebirth and I am thinking the whole time, wow I really wanted to bring some things up and out of my fifth chakra. It's coming out.

Once closed off and unable to connect with his daughters or the women he dated, Mitchell's reconnection to his Self and his emotions through deep, conscious breathing and calming and clearing meditations enabled him to show up more fully and

authentically in every relationship. Someone who once had difficulty communicating and feeling, he turned into one who wears his emotions on his sleeve, expressing and feeling with flow and ease. He reported, "I started doing a kriya for elevation. It really helped to get my strength back and let me know I was going to be OK."

**Rachel**

Rachel was a 39-year-old Iranian woman, married once and divorced. She was a product of the Iranian revolution. She and her family moved from France to Canada to the United States during her growing years, where her father was absent, and her mother had plenty of moments of stewing in her sadness and self pity.

In her early adulthood, Rachel lost two of her closest and dearest loved ones (her grandmother and her nanny, a second mother to her) within a very short time span. Having never found a connected way to make sense of death, she struggled to deal with the huge loss she experienced. Around that time, she also endured an unexpected breakup from a significant long-term relationship with her boyfriend. Having no way of making sense of or reconciling the loss she was experiencing, her body took on the traumatic stress she was unable to release by way of chronic and painful throat issues, such as tonsillitis and bronchitis. She claimed her greatest challenge had been connecting to her feelings and expressing herself from that felt sense, from her heart rather than her head. That disconnection left her untrusting of all things.

Rachel's first taste of Kundalini Yoga was at the age of 25. Her mother, a spiritual seeker, brought her to a Kundalini class, and it did NOT resonate. Still caught up in her head, she wasn't in an open place to experience the practice fully and wholeheartedly. It was ultimately through private sessions with the person who became

her spiritual teacher and Kundalini Yoga teacher that Rachel began a personal practice. She shared how, during her most painful bout with tonsillitis, one aching swallow away from tonsil surgery, she committed to a one-month chanting meditation that cleared and healed her throat for good. Healing her throat went beyond the physiological. The different mantras, pranayam, and kriyas strengthened her fifth chakra, her channel of authentic expression. The experience of Kundalini Yoga awakened her to living in awareness—awareness of her body, mind, and spirit, and above all else, reignited a sense of faith and trust in her self and her world. She reported that "The meditation I continue to come back to is the laya yoga meditation." She opened up more about what she found to be most helpful about Kundalini Yoga:

> It's the consistency—the more I do it [the practice] the more healing it brings about and when I don't do it my life goes a little chaotic so I blame it on the fact that my practice isn't consistent. What's healing? It's a trust within me. Trusting me. How much am I willing to trust? The more I trust, the more incredible experiences come my way. It reaffirms on a daily basis that I have everything I need within me, that I don't need to go outside of me to get anything. Not love, not money, not a career or friends. I need nothing outside of me. Everything that I need is contained within me. But when I am not consistent with it [the practice] I don't trust it and I go back to my fears, I doubt it, but as long as I am consistent with it a little bit everyday I trust it a little bit more everyday.

**Cara**

Cara was a 53-year-old Serbian American woman in this study. She was a surgical consultant and coordinator at an established surgeon's office. She was happily married with two grown sons from a previous marriage.

Cara's trauma seeped through her early childhood. A child of first-generation Serbian immigrants, she felt the strains and pressures of being different and not fitting in. Being teased and made fun of in class made school an uninviting place to be at times. Her home life was no better. Witnessing and experiencing the disruptions in her parents'

marriage—from screaming matches to adulterous affairs—had her choosing to move away from her parents at the age of 17.

Having moved on from her childhood and into married life, at the age of 24 Cara found herself and her husband held up at gunpoint in their own home. That terrifying assault and violation left her frozen and afraid. This led to the ultimate unraveling of her marriage and the painful discovery of her husband's drug dealings on the side. With two children under the age of 5, Cara moved out and entered a new chapter in her life as a single mother. Cara was a spiritual seeker. She was seeking spiritual support. She needed to move and feel in ways she hadn't allowed herself to. She was looking to connect to something far higher and grander then she had yet experienced.

Cara got her first taste of Kundalini Yoga at the age of 51. She cried through the entire first class. She felt she had found her home, inside and out. It didn't take long to experience that Kundalini energy rooted deeply in her core. She felt layers of her past, old emotional wounds, start to heal away. Certain kriyas grounded and connected her to the earth, while other meditations and mantras allowed her to experience the healing that occurs while surrendering to the here and now. For Cara, this dynamic blend of breath, movement, mantra, meditation, and relaxation empowered her with energy, strength, growth, and overall vital well being. It allowed her to experience herself as that "happy person" she always knew was there. She spoke about her favorite parts of her practice:

> Sat Kriya is one of the most valuable Kriyas for me. Painting my aura makes me feel strong and grounds me to the earth and the sky—connects me to Mother Earth. Makes me feel strong and powerful as a woman. I also happen to love baby pose, it's another grounded feeling to the earth and the connection it gives me. It is a safe haven, I can also fall asleep in this position. Ram Ma Da Sa is one of my favorite mantras, it lets me heal and mend whatever happens to present itself to me. It's the sun, moon, earth, and infinity, I am the infinity, I belong to and contain.

Cara went on to talk about related aspects of the practice of Kundalini Yoga, particularly about the spiritual aspect, which she has found so important to her:

> The word God to me is a really heavily loaded word – like enlightenment. First I said she was a woman blah, blah, blah. I had three books this thick of journals. I was just writing and writing so it's funny to go back and reflect on that because the way my God came to me was through light and it didn't happen once but a couple of times there where light just came through that Kundalini energy because of the meditation that we did, and it's just like your skin crawls. Kundalini has always been there, I just didn't know how to tap into it. It's that light – it's that rising. It represents to me rising. Going up the crown chakra and that gold feeling of light. What Kundalini does to me is it's an expression of that clarity. That whole feeling of yourself being you and what it's done for me is everyday I walk that path.

**Sophia**

Sophia was a 45-year-old Iranian Armenian woman at the time of her interview. She was an educator, having taught and headed school administration boards from California to India. She was in the midst of completing her doctorate in education.

Sophia's trauma and subsequent pain she experienced throughout her life related back to her parents leaving her at an early age. Her father left their home in Tehran, Iran when she was 4 ½ years old. Sophia's mother was not around much, and ultimately left the country when Sophia was 6. She spent most of her early formative years living with her grandmother, until the age of 7 ½ when she moved to England to join her mother. She described the experience of that early trauma as a heavy-weighted sense of abandonment she'd carried with her. That harrowing experience of abandonment, coupled with the loneliness of being an immigrant child, first in England and then in the United States, led her to be the perfect child and perfect student, the perfect employee and the perfect wife. She walked through her marriage like a zombie, disconnected from her Self and her essential needs, needs her husband was not meeting or nurturing. After

her divorce, she made a spirited intention to get her life and her Self back, with a vengeance.

After she experienced her first Kundalini class at the age of 36, Sophia felt as though she not only "got it," but that she "was got." She had found what she was looking for, and what she experienced was a gradual unfolding of her entire being. She shared how the kriyas were helpful on a physical level, as they helped her experience the amount of stress she was carrying in her body. For living under such a high level of stress for so long, she was amazed at how relaxed she was during savasana, or deep relaxation. Gradually, as she started feeling more relaxed and connected to her body, she began honoring her body by changing her eating and drinking habits. Her body awareness then led to deeper levels of awareness, her habits, patterns, behaviors; slowly she began to rebuild her life in a happy, healthy, and holy way. The 40-day sadhanas, for example, gave her a sense of purpose, discipline, and resilience which brought behavior patterns to surface so she could examine and change them. For Sophia, the whole practice in its entirety (not just its parts) brought her to a place of awareness, where her old, stale pain resurfaced, and newer issues connected to old, disconnected ways of thinking, doing, and being could be observed and replaced. She described it in this way:

> We think about yoga being union and Kundalini is that consciousness. It's that dormant awareness so it's like bringing that awareness to life or that dormancy to life. It's redundant to say awareness and life because being aware is being alive just fully and being in union with all that is. I completely get that. Just coming into a oneness with all things. Like I could be walking and I'll look at a leaf and find it the most remarkable thing in the world and just really connect with that leaf at that moment and just be in gratitude in the beauty of it and what it means and it just goes on and on. Or relating to my dog in ways I have never – I mean I have had dogs before but the way I relate to my dog now is on a whole different level of consciousness. The way I communicate with him and he [sic] with me. There is just a complete relationship. We completely relate to one another and there are no gaps and so it's just that – relating to everything with complete clarity

> and seeing it for what is and seeing everything for its truth of what is and being OK with that. There's innocence that goes with that as well – coming to a place of innocence and relating to children in that way. I get why kids are OK with – they see things for what it is and they're OK with that. That was the other thing through my practice – I remember actually I remember sitting in the kitchen and it hit me that I was experiencing my innocence for the first time in my adult life since I was a kid. The Kundalini Yoga brings to back to that innocence, that childlike innocence.

Her healing through Kundalini Yoga came back to her awareness and becoming more sensitive. She no longer disconnected from her self, but rather was more aware of her body and its workings. She was no longer disconnected from her life, but rather, infinitely more in tune to her surroundings, people, and the environment, along with its workings, effects, and interactions. This practice continued to heal her into the happy, contented, fulfilled, trusting, and complete woman that she was at that point in time, using tools to assist her whenever she felt the need: "When I've needed to work on a specific issue that requires my focus and projection, I turn to Archer Pose and add it to my practice."

**Brandon**

Brandon was a 48-year-old Danish man. He was a self-employed contractor and builder. He was married with two children, but at the time of the interview had been dealing with some marital strains.

Brandon's trauma dated back to his early childhood in Denmark, living with an abusive stepdad. The psychological terror, verbal and physical abuse he endured led him to block out all sense of feeling and emotion. He lived life numb and disconnected. He never felt at home. He never felt safe. He moved through life working hard, moving around, and ultimately married and settled down in Los Angeles. At the age of 39, Brandon was in prayerful anticipation of the birth of their first child, when his wife

experienced complications during delivery. Those complications turned into a medical malpractice fog of pain and fear, as Brandon witnessed his wife being cut open during an emergency C-section, only to endure and witness his son (a spitting image of himself) die during labor. His newborn baby's death was tempered with Brandon hoping and praying for his wife, who, thank God, survived.

Brandon spoke of the dull ache he sensed but refused to feel. "What do you make of life after the death of your child?" he asked. He remained numb, supportive of his wife, but numb. He threw himself into his work and slowly began to drink himself to death.

With a push and a coax from his wife and friends, he surrendered his self-sabotaging ways and stepped foot inside his first yoga class, a Kundalini Yoga class. The kriyas reconnected him to his once strong but beaten-down body, and the meditation allowed him a space to sit with all the feelings he was beginning to feel for the first time. Feelings of loss and grief, feelings of anger and sadness. Even though he could barely cross his legs and sit in easy pose, he was committed to come back because he felt. Brandon experienced his personal strength and stamina again as he experienced personal victories in stretch pose. "Engaging in stretch pose offers you opportunities to challenge yourself and build up your strength—experiencing your own personal victory," he said. He experienced the out-of-control spiraling in his mind come into some semblance of peace and quiet, allowing him a neutral space to contemplate on life and purpose, stating part of it in this way: "And the meditations, oh well, the power of Paven Paven mantra goes straight to the heart."

His experience of Kundalini Yoga and of his heightened awareness took him beyond himself, and yet seeking all within himself. His experience of the kriyas and meditations left him no choice but to trust these ancient secrets. He claimed it's simple. "Does it make you feel better? Good, then come back for more." He went on to say,

> I feel good when the physical is really hard and you feel alive. You feel in control and positive about yourself, good about yourself because if you can do some of these things then you can do a lot. Well and that's the physical side for sure, when you start moving and cleaning out the nastiness that just sits in your joints. There are many poses that I can't do physically and that's probably from childhood trauma or God knows where the stiffness comes from but it comes from something and you just have to accept that but it does help to clean out all the little cavities and little nook and crannies in your body. I mean you are more aware. You basically have all these gates, the sadness and the loving and the feelings and it's all open. You feel everything at the same time and it's very overwhelming. In a good way.

**Eli**

Eli was a 33-year-old Israeli Moroccan man. He owned a luxury home goods company for which he designed. His creativity and inspiration were fueled by his travels all over the world: from India to Portugal to France and back home to his showroom in New York City.

At the age of 29, Eli discovered that he had CML, a type of blood cancer. Receiving that life term of a diagnosis (CML is never cured, just maintained) turned the life that he knew and understood upside down. He shared how his normal way of living, including an intense medical process of blood tests and procedures and a sudden lifestyle change, were traumatic to his mind, body, and spirit. For someone who used to ignore routine check-ups, or finding any necessary reason to see a doctor, his life became painful medical test after medical test on a weekly basis, where he felt physically and spiritually violated. On top of the diagnosis and testing, the medication Eli was given stripped him

of all vital life force and energy, leaving him physically exhausted but unable to sleep. He attempted to cope by diving into his work, but the moments of depression still found their way into his sleepless nights.

Desperate for a good night's sleep, Eli recalled a yoga class his friend had taken him to a year previously. He remembered loving the class, but particularly, he remembered falling sound asleep during the Gong meditation and relaxation. That one fond memory brought Eli back to Kundalini Yoga that same year of his diagnosis. For a man who used to work long days and nights without time to care for himself, his Kundalini Yoga practice became a time for him, and that time was required every day. Within months of his committed practice, the kriyas helped his body deal with the pain of the medication and it wasn't long before Eli's doctors started decreasing the doses. He began feeling better and stronger. He experienced a new and healthy circulation of blood and prana throughout his body every time he did Breath of Fire and every time he chanted mantra. He felt his chest open and expand as he intentionally directed oxygen to the cavities in his body that needed healing. He felt his body being transformed into a stronger and healthier place to live. And as for his mind, the meditations set the foundation for an experience of clarity, quiet, and stillness. He stated, "Ego eradicator with breath of fire is my go-to tool." All of this strengthened Eli's body, expanded his vital energy, and lifted his spirit as he continued to heal, strengthen, and grow in wellness.

> There is this feeling of security. A feeling of hope and l feel like I am in a place where I can actually take action to make things better so you're not hopeless and there is something you can do and that was very profound to me. To know that there are things I can do to make the quality of my life better for me because I don't like medicine and I always believed we think it's just a way to correct things but if you really don't do the work from the inside then it really doesn't. . . . You

> know Guru Singh always says if you have allergies then what are you allergic to? And who are you allergic to? And what in your environment makes you allergic? What is it in the way you behave that makes you allergic? Do you fix it by taking allergy pills or do you fix it by trying to understand the core of it? And that to me is the way that yoga helped me – it helped me to connect to myself on a deeper level and understand why I got sick. I got sick because my body had to tell me "stop, you are running yourself to the ground and you're not honoring your body and you're not honoring your soul and you're not being good to yourself." So my body was saying "I am going to show you that I can be just as bad." Yoga also taught me how to honor my body and to be conscious of what I put into my body. What I say, the way I act, and the way I look at people, and the way I look at myself, and all that energy that you create is very healing.

**Sanja**

Sanja was a 48-year-old Indigenous American woman. She was divorced with two children. Her personal and professional passions and purpose combined to create a world of service as a Kundalini Yoga Teacher and Teacher Trainer, Permaculture Teacher and Cultural Sustainability Consultant, and of course, a Protector of Indigenous Sacred Sites.

Sanja's first traumatic imprint dated back to her early childhood, at the age of 8, when she was sexually abused. The sexual, physical, and verbal abuse continued throughout her lifetime in a painful string of unconscious choices she made in the relationships she stayed in. The last abusive notch in this pattern was with the father of her children. Disconnected from her body and spirit, removed from all strength she knew she had, she was physically and verbally abused for 5 years straight. What finally ended this cycle of abuse was when she realized that if she stayed, her two children (then ages 3 and 1 ½) could have been victims of the violence. So Sanja took the children and left, surrendering the painful existence she knew. During this traumatic disruption in her life, Sanja's father fell ill and was on his death bed. Coping with the death of her marriage

and the pain she bore from it and the pending passing of her father led her in search of a deeper connection to her body, mind, and spirit.

Sanja's first Kundalini class was all she needed to get hooked. She was "addicted." She cried and cried and felt her heart open during her first few classes. The dynamic of the pranayams, meditations, and kriyas peeled away layers of pain and opened her heart into a well of gratitude and forgiveness. The first kriya she ever did was the Magnetic Field and Heart Center Kriya. She felt her heart open wide. She forgave everyone that ever hurt her in her lifetime, including herself. She embraced the woundedness of life. And she experienced the rights, wrongs, joys, pain, good, and bad of being human through every synchronization of breath, mind, and body. She said, "Stretch pose and bow pose tests your grit and stamina. It reminds me of my personal strength."

Her Kundalini practice was like taking residence within a place of consciousness where she could approach life with objective neutrality. This softened her responses to the triggering situations life threw her way, by approaching them with grace and ease. Her engagement in life became no longer halfway or almost, but rather full of authenticity. Her Kundalini awareness, embodied and experienced, offered a clarification around her purpose and calling. She immediately became a Kundalini Yoga teacher who taught and uplifted students every day. She described her passion for it in this way:

> There is a stillness. OK, from an indigenous perspective there is this nation called Waitaha from New Zealand. It means the peacemakers. Waitaha nation are the peacemakers and Waitaha believe our body is this vessel that holds water and so your body, if it's stormy in its mind, because the brain floats in water and our bodies are made of water – if your thoughts are stormy or tumultuous then your being is not able to be at peace. So, if you're going to be a vessel of peace you will have to know how to still the waters of your being. So, when you're conscious of your breath and you have the tools in your toolkit to make the vessel

> of your water still—that's what the mantras do, that is what the prana and the breath work does, that's what the chanting does. It forces you to think and breathe rhythmically so that your thoughts are no longer tumultuous and the waters of your mind become still and those waters calm and thus you're a peaceful being. I think this is what this yoga practice brings, a consciousness of the breath. When you are conscious of your breath then you become conscious of your life.

**Teresa**

At the time of her interview, Teresa was a 46-year-old American woman, of British Isles heritage, with her own business consulting company. She was divorced. At the age of 38, Teresa was at the top of her career, having thrown herself into 80-hour weeks, living on cigarettes and caffeine. On a typical high-stressed work day, she discovered an awful pain in her back. Not wanting to waste time on herself, she rushed to the hospital for a quick shot to dull the pain, and instead was wheeled into emergency surgery. She woke up 4 months later remembering nothing. Teresa had had a 20 cm hemangioma of the liver that had ruptured. She had two thirds of her liver removed, spent 10 days on life support and 4 months in the hospital. During her year-long recovery, she lost her job and divorced her husband. Her whole life as she had known it and understood it had ended. The physical effects of the trauma on her body and life were debilitating. She had no sensation in her stomach and no abdominal muscles to sit and move. She could not drive and could barely take care of herself. Teresa was an overachiever, a perfectionist, a doer; to have her sense of agency and autonomy stripped from her caused her to fall into a high state of anxiety and depression. She felt disconnected from who she used to be and disconnected from the woman she was meant to be after her world, her life, and her personhood were shaken.

Teresa experienced her first Kundalini Yoga class at age 39. She was on the mend and looking for stress release and strengthening. She had no idea her first experience would bring feeling back in areas she hadn't felt since the surgery. She felt the energy: be it Guru Ram Das or Yogi Bhajan, she felt a fire-hot heat in her abdomen during the meditation. Amidst the disbelief and fear she felt after an ineffable experience, she felt hope and encouragement for the first time. Hence, she had to keep coming back.

Not only were the kriyas reconnecting her to and reinvigorating those frozen areas of her body, the meditations and mantras emotionally energized her and spiritually awakened her. She reported, "The mantras are healing. Whether you chant them or not, their vibration gets you in flow. I have mantra playing in every room of my house." She felt her life was finally starting again, and attributed it to the attention she gave her mind, body, and spirit throughout the experience. It was its completeness, its wholeness that was the ultimate healer.

That healing experience reconnected her to a place and sense of belonging within herself and within the world. Having felt alone during her bouts of anxiety and depression, she explained how she never felt alone anymore, she felt as if "someone was always with you." That sense of connection to her self, to others and to the universe gave her the strength and courage to keep moving on.

> I don't know how to explain it but when you realize that the energy in the universe is moving in a different direction and you can either move with it or you can fight it but it's a lot easier to move with it; and so you may or may not be ready for a change and what I realized is if you're not ready for it then you're not going to see that energy flow to get into it and take that ride. The universe may show you glimpses of things that you may not be ready to see if you're moving in that direction, but it's not going to force you in a direction you're not ready to go, but when you're ready to go it's like everything aligns. I think really it's this

> energy and it's this flow and you can tell when you're in it and when you're out of it. When you're in it things just work and when you're out of it you're like, "What is wrong? Do I need to go back to bed and start over? What do I do?" And sometimes you can correct it and sometimes you can't; and sometimes you're meant to have whatever obstacle it is but you also realize, "oh I am supposed to be experiencing this obstacle" and you look for the lesson in it whereas before you just cursed the obstacle. So you're able to have this view into your existence as an observer.

**Jennifer**

Jennifer was a 30-year-old American medical student of Northern European background, studying and preparing for residency placement. Her trauma story takes us back to her childhood. Her mother, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, left Jennifer at home at the age of 2 to be raised by her abusive father. Her father was very "old school from the old country" she explained, "women are there to serve men." Growing up with an abusive taskmaster left her both to withdraw within herself, and completely shut off from her Self. Living under constant scrutiny and correction cut away at her sense of worth early on. Jennifer felt somewhat imprisoned in her home life, and felt abandoned by her mother, whom she would see during fleeting visits. The last memory Jennifer had of her mother was slamming the car door on her mother and walking away, when she was 15 years old. Days later, her mother died in a head-on collision. Jennifer experienced nothing. Numbness. And went to school as usual.

At the age of 17, Jennifer finally freed herself and went off to college, feeling like an outsider. Unable to connect and feel, she began a wild stint of drugs and alcohol and one-night stands. She knew she was self-destructing.

Jennifer was 27 years old when she experienced her first Kundalini Yoga class. She was looking for connection, she was looking for community, she was looking for spirituality. Her first experience was one of acceptance and releasing judgment. The

kriyas got her out of her head and back into her body. She experienced the release of pain associated with her father. She observed through the meditations how her mind became clearer and more neutral as time went by. Getting in touch with what she was feeling at any given moment softened her rigidity. She felt less emotionally reactive and carried a broader, more accepting outlook on life.

She reported that she listened to mantras everyday, and had incorporated sadhana into her every-morning routine. "I keep a consistent sadhana and tailor it to where I am. It's like a hole, a big pool with so much to explore through breath, mantra, mudra."

Kundalini Yoga had become a part of her. She could not separate it. She explained how she had the tools to tap into and experience a higher frequency of being. She was more aware, and from that place of awareness and elevated consciousness she experienced faith and surrender as healing. She described herself in this way:

> Yeah, spiritually I am much stronger. I thought I was strong before. I am able to hold myself I guess. I don't know how else to say that but again I have a lot of work to do in this but it comes up in situations where you need a lot of spiritual strength I guess to hold your position because you know there is something beyond this very limited physical reality, which is funny because it's something my father would always tell me when I was growing up. "This isn't real," he would always say, "this isn't real." I would look at him and be like what is he talking about? I always thought it was crazy but now I am able to experience it, I am able to have faith in that whereas before I was so skeptical and I wanted to shut myself off from spirituality or my spiritual existence. I went through this period of really questioning if there was anything beyond this physical world and putting a lot of faith in this physical world—like I will have security if I get this kind of degree or if I get this kind of job. Or if I meet this person but now I can see how fleeting that is. It's really hard to put into words but on a daily basis I have this sense that there is something going on beyond what my eyes can see, so I am not so attached to the events. Even now in my medical training I notice how unattached I have gotten whereas before I would bend over backwards to do the things I think my authorities would want, and now I really try to connect with the core of what's going on. I am able to "say no" to something that maybe in the past I felt obligated to do to please someone or to get a certain position or get a certain evaluation. I have another authority.

## Presentation of Data and Descriptions of Themes

### Trauma: Lived Effects of Trauma

Before discussing their experiences of healing trauma through Kundalini Yoga, and describing the lived outcome resulting from those healing experiences, my participants were asked to describe their past trauma(s) and how dealing with their trauma impacted their personhood and livelihood. The participants described a number of disruptive effects that came in the aftermath of trauma. Some of these included difficulty identifying, feeling, and regulating emotions; negative self-perception; an overwhelming sense of fear and uncertainty; and lack of purpose in life. The living descriptions obtained from this phenomenological inquiry suggest that the participants' quality of life and level of functioning prior to committing to their Kundalini Yoga practice were consistent with symptoms associated with trauma, such as disconnection and dissociation, affect dysregulation, depression, anxiety, and negative self-perception (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Carter et al., 1999; Herman, 1992; Naparstek, 2004; van der Kolk, 2006).

The harrowing disruption in the aftermath of trauma insidiously crept into their way of being, feeling, thinking, doing, and living. They experienced poor body awareness, had difficulty feeling their feelings, and identifying and regulating emotions. They walked under a dark cloud of negative self-perception, and struggled making a connection to internal and external experiences, and harbored an air of uncertainty and lack of meaning, and purpose in their lives. While the terms used thus far describe these symptoms, they are removed from any sense of the experiential. For purposes of assisting the reader in gaining a felt sense of the aftermath of trauma, leading into the

description of the healing of this state, I have chosen to break down some of these effects, as described by the participants in this study. Though I have described some of my experiences of the themes of the healing process later in this chapter, I did not include any of my own descriptions of the experience of trauma or its aftermath. The participants in this study described the experience so clearly that my own experience would merely have repeated theirs, rather than adding to it.

**The fear of the unknown, a sense of chaos: affect dysregulation.** Many of the participants in this study described various aspects of affect dysregulation: a fear of the unknown; experiencing being out of control, being in chaos; questioning systems of meaning and fear of the future or not having a sense of a future. There were various descriptions of this experience. These words of Eli's seem to sum up much of what participants described: "It was like a rollercoaster because I didn't know what to feel. I didn't know if I should be upset, if I should be sick or if I should be healthy. I was just trying to be whatever and all I wanted it to do was go away."

In addition to not knowing what to feel, there was an underlying confusion and fear. Liana described the confusion this way:

> You have no compass. It's just spinning and spinning and spinning and it still feels like that sometimes. You get to that point where you're like I am so deeply confused . . . . So it was that constant like not being sure and not knowing and living in that state of fear. Once again like you have no control. You feel like you have no control over your life. You feel like what's the point?

Other participants described very much this same experience in various ways, talking about feeling totally in chaos, feeling as though their lives were totally out of control.

The idea of not having a sense of the future was contained in phrases like "wanting it all to go away" (Eli), as stated above, "it can't continue here" (Liana), and not wanting "to be in that atmosphere" (Sophia).

**Disconnection from self, other, world.** The process of dissociation and disconnection—the act of mentally, emotionally, and spiritually separating oneself from one's body during an intrusively traumatic event in order to endure the personal pain and devastation—becomes a new way of living, dealing, or coping in the aftermath of trauma. Participants described a number of disruptive effects that came in the aftermath of trauma. Some of the most common included trouble identifying, feeling, and regulating emotion and negative self-perception; poor body awareness and ownership of body; lack of connection to internal experience and self-care habits; and lack of meaning and purpose in life and future.

Most participants reported trouble with emotions, particularly finding it difficult to identify and experience one's own emotions, as they reported suppressing emotion. They also reported a handful of ways they learned to cope with or avoid feeling the feelings that come with the traumatic disruptions, and completely disconnect from experiencing their life fully and completely. One common type of description was that in various ways, participants did not feel. Michelle said, "I just remember feeling numb." Sophia went a step further: "I was a walking zombie. I was the walking dead. There was a time where I remember waking up and not having an emotion."

Others spoke of making a more deliberate effort to avoid feelings or suppress emotions. Jennifer shared, "I was drinking and drinking very irresponsibly and I would

black out and there were nights where I couldn't remember." Mitchell spoke of using a similar technique, with an addition:

> I wasn't letting myself feel. . . . . I would get up at 5 or 6 and . . . I was physically working hard and then whatever time I would spend with the kids and stuff and after that I was self-medicating myself with alcohol at night to go to sleep. Then get up the next morning and do the same thing again.

**Negative self-perception and emotions.** All the participants experienced a heaviness of negative emotions and thoughts about themselves and their lives. A heavy blanket of anxiety or depression weighed their spirits down. The participants also frequently noted negative self-perceptions, particularly in the form of low self-esteem and self-loathing. Eli talked about depression in this way:

> After awhile you realize that there's nowhere you feel comfortable . . . and the feeling that I [sic] rather die because I don't want to feel like this . . . and that's where you get depressed and you feel very helpless.

Brandon said it more briefly, though eloquently: "you do feel at a loss and nothing matters. . . . . My life, just my life force was disappearing."

Anxiety overwhelmed these participants. Liana shared, "I was having panic attacks and you don't know what to do with yourself and so . . . I must really be crazy because I can't control it." Michelle reported that "I lost the will to live. I shook all the time, trembled all the time."

In addition to the depression and the anxiety due to the aftermath of trauma, they described loathing themselves, feeling like failures. Michelle's description of a cycle she experienced was the most dramatic example:

> Every day all day long I would cycle through basically the following. Complete stone like dead to incredible unspeakable rage violent suicidal and homicidal rage to inconsolable crying, indescribable anxiety and kind of in a constant way, a searing physical pain that I have never felt before or since but lasted for years. . . . The only thing there was, was how I had failed . . . . I was certain I deserved to die.

With all of this heaviness was a feeling of not fitting in, sometimes never fitting in. While it was related to the aftermath of the traumas, it was also part of the experience of the trauma for some participants. Sophia described it this way:

> So when we come back to feeling different it was also like that in a new school and not only in my own country did I feel like completely different than the rest of the kids but moving into a new country and new language at that age too trying to fit in.

Liana's experience included her family: "If we went to restaurants and things people would come up and harass us. I just felt it was back to the whole 'we just don't fit in.'"

**Journey Home: From Trauma to Dharma Begins with Feeling at Home**

This lived and embodied journey home from trauma to dharma involved coming home in body, in mind, and in sprit. Coming home within oneself. Of course, these participants' journey home within themselves required a safe and supportive space to nurture and support their exploration. That came by way of a non-judging and accepting community. Being in the presence of people who are already accepting of and comfortable within themselves, with who they are, allows one to feel comfortable within oneself. Having that safe, supportive sense of home on the outside, allows one to venture

to reconnect to the home inside. A feeling of home outside and in. An experience of home outside and in.

**Feeling of home: safe and accepted.** Over and over again, participants described feeling that they had come home when in Kundalini Yoga class. These expressions varied. Michelle described it as a bit of a process: "I felt safe and out of danger and . . . I could feel some sort of relief. I felt like I belonged in there." Eli said, "I felt safe in the space." Liana reported, with great poignancy "It's the first time I ever had it in my life. Of just being home. Love and just not being judged." Cara took a further step with this theme: "I felt like I was home. This is where I needed to be. This was my home. This is the community that I have always wanted." And Mitchell went one more step: "In short, it's like I am home whoever I run into. It's really like I am home."

Part of what made Kundalini Yoga class feel like home was experiencing the group energy of the class as healing. Two participants described this experience. Teresa shared that

> I had to go and have surgery all over again. . . . . Obviously yoga was not going to be happening but with Kundalini the difference is I went to Tej's class every week and laid on the floor. I just laid on the floor to be in the energy and the flow was so healing. . . . . I feel it and you feel warm and you feel your body healing. Your mind rests and you wake up refreshed.

Michelle experienced more emotional healing. While this excerpt is rather long, it creates a clear picture of an experience of the healing power of a group of Kundalini Yoga practitioners in class together.

> All of the energy and stuff that happens with those kinds of – that causes those kinds of feelings and that generates those kinds of feelings was like grabbed, harnessed and like not tamed but either disposed of or transformed because of the practice. Like some other kind of energy, the group energy. That was a big part of it and again I didn't know it at the time but like I am a walking ball of poisonous hate and inconsolable grief bar nothing and I am coming in there and literally the group energy is just sucking that up and dissipating it and dissipating it and to me it was an endless well. I never expected to feel better. . . . It was like these little graduations and it took a long time from alright to not thrashing all the time to I enjoyed that one day to I think I am feeling OK today.

## The Horizon of Awareness

Before I introduce the themes below, I must bring attention to the central condition of the participants' experience of healing and transformation as a result of their Kundalini Yoga practice. Through a back-and-forth process of horizonalization (the phenomenological method of identifying the condition of the phenomenon that gives it its distinctive character) the essential, central piece of awareness emerged.

For the purpose of this study, awareness is understood as a state of being that is experienced and achieved through an internal felt sense of and connection to the body, mind, and spirit, and the external sense of connection with others and the world at large. It is being a sensitive observer to one's own existence, sensations, thoughts, and actions. Through awareness, one can experience life as an observer, recognizing the choices one is making and the implications and consequences of those choices (Bhajan, 2003; Emerson & Hopper, 2011; S.P.K. Khalsa, 1996).

There are two essential threads woven into the horizon of awareness. This fabric of awareness could not be woven without these threads. The participants' experience of living and embodying awareness resulted from their deepened somatic awareness (also referred to as interoceptive awareness) and their accessing and engaging the internal observer, or witness consciousness. As the participants learned to sustain the experience of lived embodiment and being present in the body, their Kundalini Yoga practice awakened and cultivated that expanded awareness, observer, or witness consciousness.

All of the essential pieces of the participants' experience stemmed from and came back to their expanded awareness. Kundalini Yoga offered these practitioners the technology to awaken and embody the internal observer or witness in and of their lives. Giving oneself and one's life the gift of one's awareness lays the foundation for healing from and transforming through trauma.

The participants' lived descriptions uncovered how awareness is a critical component of healing and transformation. There is an aspect of healing, transforming, and thriving from trauma which involves discovering one's way to come to or awaken to awareness: awareness of one's self, one's world, and the Universe. From that awakened and expanded place of awareness, through easily generated states of calmness and clarity, the practitioners embodied a place of contemplation and reflection. From that clear and neutral observer role, or witness consciousness, the practitioners were able to consciously recognize the choices they could make to take better care of themselves and positively affect their lives.

While many of the excerpts within each theme below incorporated and demonstrated this horizon of awareness, several of the participants spoke directly and

specifically of their experience of living in and embodying awareness. For example, Eli recognized his newly acquired awareness as an essential piece for taking better care of himself:

> I am definitely more aware and that's kind of half the battle so even when I don't show up for myself, at least I recognize that I didn't, then I say OK you failed to take care of yourself but at least you recognize that and next time be more sensitive to put an end to it or start taking care of yourself sooner.

Liana explained how her Kundalini Yoga experience gave her "an expanded awareness to different things and opened my mind to different things," enabling her to make better choices. Several other participants shared how living and embodying awareness offered a healthier way to cope with the day-to-day stresses of life. Cara explained, "I am able to cope with things differently...I don't react. I just take a step back and observe; where years ago I didn't and I always reacted. Now I don't. I watch and observe."

Sophia described in detail how her awareness is her new coping tool:

> The way I cope with that [stress] now is very different from the way I would cope with it before. Now I can watch it and observe it and not let it get in my own way. That is also a result of the practice – to be able to do that. So if I am having a really heavy day I can sit with that and observe it and question it and see why it's like that or just be in it, and allow myself to be in it fully and just fully experience it so that ultimately it just dissolves.

And Teresa took her experience of awareness a step further, in using it as a tool to uncover life's lessons:

> You're able to have this view into your existence as an observer. When you're out of the flow you're like, what is wrong? What do I do? And sometimes you can correct it and sometimes you can't. And sometimes you're meant to have whatever obstacle it is, but you also realize, "oh I am supposed to be experiencing this obstacle" and you look for the lesson in it, whereas before you just cursed the obstacle.

All of the essential themes that follow emerged from the central piece of awareness and further clarify and explicate its very essence. In addition to material from the data for this study, I have folded in my own experience of each of these six themes of awareness.

**The Six Themes of Awareness**

Six themes arose from the analysis of the phenomenological interviews. As I attempted to understand participants' experiences in their own lived words, I allowed themes to emerge through the participants' rich lived descriptions of their lifeworlds. These themes can be used to present the lived outcomes experienced through the healing and transformation experienced through the practice. The participants' experience of healing trauma through Kundalini Yoga, and the tools they acquired through the practice, permeated their lives and supported a lived transformation, resulting in changes within their lifeworlds, such as self –perception, agency (to actively participate and make choices in life), trust in a Higher Power/God, and connection to others.

The themes of awareness organically revealed themselves through the participants' rich descriptions and my journaling and heuristic turns at the data. The data are presented under the structure of these themes for the purpose of simplicity and to illustrate their overlapping nature. Before moving into them, and for further expansion of

the concept of awareness, I present a section specifically on a central aspect of the idea of awareness: witness consciousness.

**Witness Consciousness: Expanded Awareness/Observer**

Witness consciousness transforms both the yoga mat and the world at large into "a laboratory for exploring your internal world of feeling and thought" through a calming acceptance of whatever is happening (Cope, 1999, p. 179). Witness consciousness is not the same as passivity, but rather a nonreactive, clear, and neutral space from which to consciously follow through with appropriate action.

All of the participants learned to connect to and experience a new inner landscape of sensations in their bodies by directing their attention to waves of thoughts and feelings that were normally kept out of awareness. Rather than disconnecting, as they had in the past, they learned to fully experience life by acknowledging and connecting to the sensations in their bodies. With a detached observer's stance they were able to experience a deeper connection to the feelings and sensations in their bodies without dissociating, recoiling, or unconsciously reacting. Jennifer stated it the most simply and clearly: "I have been able to be more of an observer of things. I am able to recognize these patterns and see them and not get so attached to the difficult emotions and just really experience all of it."

**Theme 1: Acceptance**

Many participants expressed aspects of their healing Kundalini Yoga experience that led to an overall lived space of acceptance of themselves and their life experiences (past and present), through connection to internal states (feelings), and being aware of the present moment. The theme of acceptance aims to reflect participants' body awareness (interoceptive awareness) and present moment experience, as well as the shifts in their

levels of acceptance regarding their life circumstances/experiences. These three essential structures within this theme are described in detail below.

**Body awareness and connection to inner experiences.** This category refers to the sense of knowing, or being attuned to, what is occurring within. This category is further defined by four subcategories, including introspection, emotional experience, physical sensations and body, as well as the mind-body connection.

***Introspection.*** This reflects a deepening sense of awareness and ability to look inwards in a meditative way and feel safe connecting with one's inner experiences. Most participants shared reflections in this category, such as Brandon, who reported it this way:

> There are many poses that I can't do physically and that's probably from childhood trauma or God knows where the stiffness comes from but it comes from something and you just have to accept that but it does help to clean out all the little cavities and little nook and crannies in your body. I mean you are more aware. . . . You basically have all these gates, the sadness and the loving and the feelings and it's all open. You feel everything at the same time and it's very overwhelming. In a good way.

Greg reported a significant experience of becoming aware of anger he had internalized and acknowledging this anger:

> So I just got in the car and drove there and went to the first class and as I was going into the class . . . and I was just so rage – I was in a really bad place . . . . I don't remember what we did in the class but by the end of the class it literally felt like there was smoke or steam literally coming off my body in terms of the

> amount of relief that I had. It was almost like all that pain was evaporating and going up into space or something.

Several participants reported that they became aware their bodies had been clogged with emotions, and that through Kundalini Yoga they found themselves detoxing, releasing, and opening. Greg said simply, "That whole first year a lot of it was about letting go of my old self." Eli connected his experience to feeling safe to do this: "All those little things made me . . . feel safe. . . . I felt so clogged with emotions and fears and tears that wouldn't come out and thoughts that were circulating all over and wouldn't stop." Michelle voiced the power and the extent of this process as she experienced it: "I couldn't pretend that it didn't suck. So I didn't and in doing that I believe, that I really did express the trauma the toxins and all of it that can be exorcized."

Participants described moving from awareness of the difficulties in body and emotions to experiencing awareness in a more holistic and healthy way. Jennifer shared that "I am able to recognize these patterns and see them and not get so attached to the difficult emotions and just really experience . . . all of it. So I think I have been able to be more of an observer of things." Eli was able to describe his experience of awareness with his favorite exercise:

> I would take a deep breath and do it and then hold it and spread the hands out and define the aura and that just always set the tone for everything for me. I felt more open. OK first with the breath I felt like everything was circulation better and I felt taller. My back felt taller, my neck felt taller and my eyes seemed whiter. My face felt like it was opening a little bit, . . . . I felt so much wider. With that feeling I felt like I could do more and I felt bigger.

Sophia expressed the changes she experienced, due to greater awareness and appreciation of her body:

> I just couldn't ingest these things as I became more aware of my body and more conscious of the temple that is my body . . . . It was sacred. My body became a sacred space for me and I couldn't shit in it anymore basically. So as that conscious shift started happening I stopped ingesting things that I thought were defacing and defecating in my body.

For Sophia, these awarenesses, which changed habits she'd had for years, had an impact on the people she knew and socialized with because she was no longer how they had known her to be.

***Present moment experience.*** The category of present moment experience was chosen to represent participants' experiences of being consciously aware in the present moment. Almost all of the participants expressed experiences of being more present in yoga and in their lives more generally. Rachel described how she realized that she could choose to be mindful and bring herself into the present moment:

> It feels powerful to me because I have some control over it. I didn't have control over it before so it's grounding, it's powerful, it's so in the now and in the present that nothing bothers me like no matter how painful or how sad a situation is when I am in that now or in that moment nothing is bothering me.

Greg described a similar experience with getting into the present moment:

> I had so much in my head and that's gone and if it should come back I know how to stop it. . . . You breathe, return to the present moment. . . . You go into that gap between the experience and the action and the thought. But something in that just

> clicked . . . being in the present moment and being ok with whatever comes your way.

Others, such as Liana and Rachel, used breathing consciously to help themselves calm when they found themselves feeling anxious. Mitchell's description was very simple: "First thing is just conscious breathing. . . . It helps me be right here. Lets me be right here in the now."

***Shift in perspective of life experience.*** This category refers to the ways in which participants described shifts in their levels of acceptance regarding various aspects of their life experiences (past and present). It is important to note that acceptance in this context refers to a sense of being at peace with life as it was and currently is, rather than a sense of resignation or giving up. Some of this was expressed in the above examples; however, the following excerpts are designed to demonstrate specifically a shift in perspective. Teresa reported that "There are . . . things where I would be like no I don't want that to happen to me again but that I wouldn't change because it has led me to where I am today." Michelle considered her shift in a more dramatic way:

> What I can say is that sucked and I have this. I get this. . . . what it really does is it repairs your central nervous system. It's . . . whatever I need to keep on keeping on.

Eli described more of the process of the shift for him:

> I didn't want to admit it to anyone . . . . but everyone had their own difficulties that they were dealing with so after awhile I said well mine is this . . . so after awhile that also put everything in perspective for me. Then you get to a place where you feel less sorry for yourself and it automatically makes you more strong

[sic] I guess.

All of the examples and subthemes above fit into my personal experience of acceptance as I experienced healing from my own trauma via Kundalini Yoga. I had spent so much of my trauma recovery wrapping my head around the abuse I had experienced, without ever connecting to my internal felt states. I would intellectualize my feelings, rather than feel my feelings. The pranayams and the kriyas guided me back to feeling. The feeling wasn't always good, but it was necessary. It awakened a sensitivity in me that had been dulled from past pain. And yet there I was. In the moment, I was finally feeling, and accepting the feeling right then and there, and in turn, I began to feel its intensity in my body begin to dissolve. It felt as though the channels I had opened in my body through breathing and moving allowed a clearing for this pranic energy to move through, grabbing stale, disserving emotions on its way out my crown.

That inwardly attuned experience of somatic awareness was an essential piece of healing and transformation. Through internal contact with the depths of their bodies, the participants were able to come to present. "We drop into the body and all the way through" (Blackstone, 2008, p.114).

Sensing and exploring their earthly, flesh-and-bone lived bodies required witness consciousness or expanded awareness. As demonstrated above, they accessed the "witness" by diving into their bodies. The participants experienced an initial coming home to the earthen flesh and bones of their bodies in order to access the witness or observer, and live in expanded awareness. They learned to connect inward in order to expand outward.

**Theme 2: Agency**

The second theme identified is agency. Tapping into a sense of agency was a common experience among participants as they all reported a greater sense of responsibility and control over their lives. Most participants illustrated the way in which their Kundalini Yoga experience helped them to build skills, or recognize that they already had the skills, to manage stressful situations related to the trauma and life in general. Specifically, the theme of agency aims to present the participants' recognition of choice and sense of control, and their newly acquired life tools for effective action.

**Choice and sense of control.** Participants recognized the presence of choice in every moment and the sense of control over making choices to take better care of themselves. Liana voiced seeing Kundalini Yoga as a way to replace her previous coping tools.

> That energy that comes from . . . being open to something. Being open to what is that and why do I feel this way . . . because I felt like I had no other coping tools and so those became my tools. I went from my, you know, my tools were drinking, sex and then OK I am going to do some breathing, some mantra, and those tools are what allowed me to get my life under control.

Rachel described experiencing herself as having power that she never used to have before:

> I am now more than ever able to come back to now. It feels powerful to me because I have some control over it. I didn't have control over it before so it's grounding . . . . Control over my mental, spiritual, emotional wellbeing is in my power. I have the power to every moment control that and experience it and be in

> the moment of it . . . but I am surrendering to that feeling and it's OK.

And Eli spoke of how he had found a way to both improve and manage his health symptoms:

> It's amazing because it's so complicated and sophisticated and profound but it's very simple. Yes it's just the way that you control you mind, . . . but what it gives you is so much bigger . . . and that to me is like discovering priceless magic. . . . To know that there are things I can do to make the quality of my life better for me [that do the work from the inside].

Brandon shared that he uses the tools from his practice to feel good about himself. He went on to say,

> I found a tool to save myself and hopefully my family. In some ways, and I am sure others will agree, that it saved my life. I can't think of anything that I could have done that would have had the same effect.

Sanja reflected on her awareness of choice, beyond the level of choice most people think of in their lives:

> Well it helped me recognize the choices that I made caused the traumatic imprints that I experienced. . . . it taught me to be more patient with myself and be more patient with others too. And the choices that they are choosing for themselves may affect me but keeping my side of the street as clean as possible so any kind of karmic events that come my way from other people's choices I don't react and I am not reactionary.

From my own experience, I'll never forget the time I was in the middle of a kriya and we had moved into the next exercise in the set: simple shoulder-shrugs, inhaling my

shoulders up toward my ears and exhaling them back down. Simple, and yet the experience was profound. During this constricting and releasing motion it hit me: I create the tension in my life, and I have the ability to release it. Wow, I have a choice around how I will respond to life stresses when they knock down my door. I have my own ability to respond, a responsibility to take care of myself. It's a choice I get to make, and the consequence of that choice reveals itself in my body, and in my life.

**Tools for effective action.** Tools for effective action is a category that addresses the empowering experience of recognizing one has the skills and tools to care for oneself. Nearly all participants reported such experiences as they relayed stories of realizing they have the skills to relieve anxiety, other distressing emotions, and debilitating thoughts. These tools also proved to offer techniques to soothe and comfort themselves and manage life situations. This category is broken down into four subcategories describing the intricacies of their experience using the following tools: breath, meditation, mantra/chanting, and sadhana.

***Breath as tool.*** Almost all the participants reported using their breath as a resource; that is, ways they had started to access their breath to elicit a sense of calm, to presence themselves, and to manage emotion. This was another skill learned through their Kundalini Yoga experience and used as a tool off the yoga mat as well. About half of the participants reported that the skill of controlled breathing allowed them to find a sense of calm. Rachel and Liana provided some clear examples of this. Liana put it this way: "Then to finally go well, I can breathe now. I can know that whenever I get into that phase of stress or anxiety or whatever . . . and [does breathing exercise] that's it, that's enough."

Rachel spoke about using breath as a tool when she is driving, especially if she felt any upset while driving.

> I just take the time to breathe, deep belly breathing. . . . I spend the entire drive deep breathing. Inhaling, exhaling through the nose which is just very basic breathing. For me it's very calming. . . . by the time I am out of that car it's like what was I worried about?

***Meditation as tool.*** Similar to breath as tool, many of the participants turned to meditation as a way to bring a sense of calm and clarity before acting from a place of emotion. Mitchell described taking time for meditation daily: "I have my ten minutes where I can sit and mediate. . . . Helps me get through the day and helps me look at things clearly." Rachel, describing a particular meditation she enjoyed and used, shared this:

> So that's one of the mediations for me that has always been there and has become a full circle for me. . . . Before it was a release for me and now it's a creation for me. It's always something that I go back to and enjoy.

Sophia described what the meditation experience was like for her.

> Just being quiet and not only sitting in a quiet space but being quiet within. Just really coming into that. . . . So I became very aware of the noise inside and the tensions and pulls and challenges that were happening and the battles that were happening inside. So the mediation would bring my external and internal spaces into a sense of balance where they could reflect each other.

My own experience of meditation reflects and expands on these descriptions. For me, the experience of meditation is that sensation of mastering and transcending the

waves of my mind. I am floating along my stream of consciousness, cleansing my mind of all thoughts and feelings that wax and wane. It serves as a filter, garbage cleaner of sorts, by clearing out my subconscious of the residual scrapings of a pained past that no longer serves me, allowing me to tune into the Infinite continuous flow. Through this process, I can guide myself to the here and now in a state of shuniya—that zero point of stillness, and neutrality where I am able to observe my life without attaching to it and reacting to it.

***Chanting mantra as tool.*** Chanting mantras were described in the similar vein of meditation. They too, offered the majority of the participants a technique to be in control and come to present. Though many participants described finding chanting the mantras as helpful, Liana's descriptions of using this tool were the most powerful.

> You know chanting was life changing for me. . . . it was like taking that screaming and chanting. That chanting and the focus on it when you came out the other side there was something that was different. Serenity. A sense of peace. . . . The Adi Shakti for example was the experience of very empowering. Once again just going through that what am I doing with my life and then Adi Shakti and I would step in and I would be chanting that and I felt like whatever I am doing I am capable of handling it.

***Sadhana (daily committed practice) as tool.*** The majority of participants described the importance of their steady, committed Kundalini Yoga practice in keeping them on track and able to make more conscious choices. Mitchell reported his experience of it this way: "Discipline. I know I have that commitment and discipline within myself but I felt so good after doing sadhana. Feeling I could do anything. It

really was the feeling that I could do anything." Michelle described this as a sort of ongoing process for her:

> Right now I am doing a sadhana right now that is essentially a meditative sadhana. . . . That is kind of how I feel about sadhana – like what am I trying to do out here for the rest of the day? If I didn't have sadhana I am like working without tools.

**Theme 3: Authority**

The third theme reflecting the participants' resulting transformed way of living after their Kundalini Yoga experience is authority. All of the participants reported/described a newly acquired positive perception and sense of self, and many of them recognized a deeper life purpose. Some participants acknowledged an appreciation or admiration for themselves and all they had been through and accomplished, as well as all that they were capable of doing and being. The theme of authority reflects the participants' experience of positive sense of self, self-confidence and expression, and sense of life purpose.

**Positive sense of self.** All of the participants described feeling an increased sense of self-love or appreciation for themselves. A few participants spoke of increased self-acceptance and comfort being themselves. They often linked this experience with a reduced need for external validation from others. For instance, Greg, in contrast to his trauma-induced behavior described above, reported that, in response to being asked how he was feeling in teachers' training, "you know that feeling when you first fall in love – that feeling of bliss and wholeness. I feel like that all the time. . . . I was looking for a relationship to provide that and I finally realized I could give it to myself." Liana spoke

about having found a way, through Kundalini Yoga, to honor herself. Rachel described it this way: "the more I do it the more healing it brings about . . . . It reaffirms on a daily basis that I have everything I need within me. That I don't need to go outside of me to get anything."

**Self-confidence and expression.** Authority for some of the participants was demonstrated in their heightened confidence levels because of the sense of control they now recognized they had over themselves and their lives. More specifically for some, their Kundalini Yoga experience offered them a stronger voice and more confident space from whence to express their desires and get their needs met. This self-confidence and expression involved setting boundaries, expressing their feelings and perspectives, and feeling heard or effective. Liana, for example, described the empowering feeling of being able to say no:

> Ultimately what I got out of yoga was the ability to say no. At some point, I will learn again to say yes but you kind of get to that point where you are like, I don't feel right so like no, and no has become a complete sentence.

Mitchell had a different perspective: "I have become much more open. It has allowed me to open up my heart. It lets me share more." Rachel's sharing had some similarity to this: "Now I am able to speak from my heart and be very connected to that conversation. I feel it coming out of my heart when I am saying it."

From my experience, I related to Liana's experience of the word "no." I was always seeking love and acceptance and approval outside of my self, which meant becoming the quintessential "yes girl" and people pleaser. I would say yes even when it was a disservice to me and my being. As I began to take the reins of my life back

through the practice, and redirected that search for love inside myself, I just felt myself begin to further expand into all that I am, no longer afraid to be me. I no longer felt a need to bend and compromise who I was and what I did to accommodate another's expectations of me. I wasn't afraid of disappointing. Yes, it still feels as uncomfortable as ever to disappoint another, but I'm no longer afraid of offering an honest "no," when it's serving me in the healthiest, most honorable way. No, I don't deserve that. No, I won't be more like her. No, no, no. I am who I am, that is that. No apologies.

**Life purpose.** Many of the participants experienced and embraced a deeper life purpose. This aspect of their sharing came from a deeply heart-centered place. Sophia's sharing centered on this:

> It is my life. I don't separate it from my life. . . . it's brought me to that place of union with all that is, so what more can I ask for. It's brought me to a place of union with myself and my purpose in this life.

Liana shared how she came to understand the connection between dharma and her purpose:

> To me dharma means to fulfill your life purpose. . . . I have something and it's that feeling of going not only God loves me but that feeling of there is something that I am supposed to do. I am unique.

Mitchell was able to state his experience of purpose very simply: "My purpose is to help people. To keep myself open to anything and keep my heart open to know my truth." Michelle spoke poetically at greater length:

> The way to go from trauma to dharma. From trauma being like this fate to dharma being my path to destiny. A chosen, a commitment of mine to be here

> and to serve. One time [in meditation] I got this "to love, to serve, to teach, to be" and that is my purpose here. . . . and you know what – those are all the same thing. They are just synonyms of the same thing. I think it means for me that what I was always afraid to hope was true, is true.

**Theme 4: Allowing**

All of the participants experienced an expanded sense of consciousness that included an understanding of and connection to spirit, the universe, higher power, or God. They shared lived descriptions of surrendering and allowing something greater than themselves to take over aspects of their lives they could not control. The theme of allowing reflects the participants' experience of a connection to the universe (as an observer), and a deepened sense of spirituality, faith, and trust.

**Connection to Universe and God (embodying the observer).** All of the participants experienced a deeper connection to Spirit (as Universe, God, or Higher Power) and experienced being an observer of life. Many realized they were no longer alone in life. Teresa shared her experience in this way:

> I don't know how to explain it but when you realize that the energy in the universe is moving . . . and you can either move with it or you can fight it but it's a lot easier to move with it . . . . I think the one thing that you feel is that you're not alone and you feel that you have something that helps you . . . . I don't know if I can fully convey it but you have this sense of community even when you're alone.

Brandon shared about experiencing being an observer of his life in this way: "You can replace that sadness with this. With yoga, with Kundalini. With awareness and

awareness about yourself. Like you get to a vantage point where you can look down on what you're doing." Similarly, Greg stated,

> I think that is what it is – it's a higher level of awareness. It's the ability to go meta – to get that step above your thoughts and get to that higher place where you can recognize that your thoughts are just thoughts and you can start to see that in others.

Sophia spoke more specifically about a sense of oneness with all of life:

> It has just elevated my level of consciousness to include the universe. Just being at one with everything. . . . just seeing everything in a very clear way and being in awe with the most simple things and with everyday things. Just being in awe and loving life and not having to do any kind of extraordinary things . . . . just seeing things for their freshness and their beauty or whatever it is and loving it for what it is.

In addition, Sophia shared a renewed sense of innocence, which was part of the sense of oneness:

> I remember, actually I remember sitting in the kitchen and it hit me that I was experiencing my innocence for the first time in my adult life since I was a kid. The Kundalini Yoga brings me back to that innocence, that childlike innocence. . . . That was a defining moment of being aware of that innocence and recapturing that. We think about yoga being union and Kundalini is that consciousness.

A connection to God and the Universe was a significant piece of my own experience with Kundalini Yoga. I was raised Jewish, went to Hebrew school, had a bat mitzvah, visited the "holy land" of Israel, and yet, my first experience of God was on my

yoga mat. There is just this overwhelming, vibrational sensation of love and joy that permeated every cell of my body. I was in a warm bath of light that expanded my sense of self beyond my vessel of a body. I felt connected to the others in the room, I felt connected to the drivers in cars honking outside. I wanted to get up and hug everyone, and say "Hey, we're okay. We're MORE than okay. We are blessed!"

**Spirituality, faith, and trust.** The majority of the participants experienced a deepening of spirituality, faith, and trust. They acknowledged where and when they recognized and allowed a higher power at work in their lives. Rachel, for example, shared how her practice has affected this area of her life:

> I always say to people that of all the yogas I have done Kundalini is the most life transforming . . . . Because it incorporates the true meaning of yoga mind, body and spirit . . . . I never walked out of it [other types of yoga] trusting in something higher than me. I feel like Kundalini Yoga has brought that to me. Has brought a faith to me and a spirituality to me that has connected my mind, I am so mind oriented, it's connected my heart and the fact that it's also physical.

Cara reported that she had always had difficulty with other spiritual language and practice, until she noticed something in her class: "Kundalini has always been there, I just didn't know how to tap into it. It's that light – it's that rising. It represents to me rising. Going up the crown chakra and that gold feeling of light." Jennifer reported a similar experience:

> before I was so skeptical and I wanted to shut myself off from spirituality or my spiritual existence. . . . It's really hard to put into words but on a daily basis I have this sense that there is something going on beyond what my eyes can see so I

am not so attached to the events.

**Theme 5: Appreciation (connection to others)**

The fifth theme, appreciation, reflects the participants' experiences of deeper connection to others. The majority of the participants expressed a more authentic experience of their relationship and connection to others. Nearly all of the participants experienced a desire and duty to give back to others, through service (or seva).

**Authentic relationships.** A majority of the participants described feeling an increased sense of connection to and authenticity within their relationships. More specifically, at times this was in reference to greater comfort with vulnerability and being intimate, or being more committed to doing the work in relationships.

***Comfort with vulnerability and being intimate.*** About half of the participants experienced a developing ability to tolerate vulnerability and/or being intimate with others. For instance, Mitchell talked about beginning to practice what he called the work of relationship for the first time with a woman.

> Then I say wait a second. I said I will not give up and I will stay committed and I need to get into this. I don't need to fix this but just here and listen to her and it's a lot of work. But . . . it gets better. The intimacy and not just the physical intimacy but the intimacy in the relationship . . . . First time in my life . . . . I wouldn't go to that ugly work at it hard place to come out the other end, where there is that intimacy and is that joy.

Liana also shared that she had begun opening up to relationship in ways she never had before.

> I have much more authentic relationships. I am more authentic with myself and I

> am less judgmental of myself. . . . I still struggle like with my boyfriend. . . . I know that there is a part of me that is OK with being vulnerable and that is something I didn't have before and that is what shifted my relationships because I am OK now.

Sanja and Sophia both shared about coming to a place where they could experience compassion for others, releasing old triggers, and forgiving people who had hurt them. Sanja, in particular, said that this experience created in her a desire for more of it.

My own experience mirrored these examples. I thought I had closed off my heart forever. I had resigned to "playing it safe." And playing it safe meant not allowing myself to be open. And yet, I experienced my heart opening and expanding every time I committed to sitting on my yoga mat and directed my attention inward. As I learned to trust my internal experiences, as I learned to trust me and my ability to take care of myself and my life, that trust began to expand outward. My peeling away my shielded layers and exposing myself became an expected prerequisite for truly connecting to and experiencing another. The more I trusted those vulnerable moments with others in my life, the more I got to taste the joy of intimacy.

**Giving back, seva, service.** Nearly all of the participants experienced a desire and duty to give back to others, through service (or seva). Some of this material overlapped with the information about purpose above, yet some of it was a little more direct. For example, Mitchell shared, "That is really what I want to do is to help other people. That's a big feeling in knowing that we're all connected." Liana shared it as coming from a more joyful place:

> I know now that I feel comfortable enough to walk up to somebody and just give

> them a hug. I don't know you but I am going to give you a hug because you look like you need it and it reminds me of how OK I am and you know what my life may feel like that but this person really needs a hug and because of that God sends me people to give them hugs.

**Theme 6: Authenticity**

This sixth and final theme of authenticity reflects the participants' experience of embodying all the other themes, which in turn supported their living an authentic way of life. Almost all of the participants expressed a newly experienced/acquired sense of happiness, love, joy, and peace which resulted in this lived outcome. This lived outcome of the healed experience of Kundalini Yoga and the acquisition of Kundalini Yoga life tools was described through their experience of living in awareness and living in a happier, more joyful, and more peaceful place.

For Cara, living in awareness allowed her to experience her authentic state of being as "that whole feeling of yourself being you." She was no longer afraid of being herself:

> I used to care what people said and did and thought about me but I don't care anymore and it doesn't bother me . . . Finally I was living my authentic life the way I wanted to live my life . . . and not how anyone wanted me to.

Rachel also shared how she moved beyond her fear of being herself and expressing herself in the most genuine way,

> I had this façade for a long time but I now genuinely feel it deep inside . . . that I don't need to have a script to be accepted. I don't have to put a front up. You like me as I am or you don't.

For Greg the experience of living authentically involved embracing a career that fed his soul:

> I was taking jobs as a director because it fed my ego, but it wasn't feeding my soul. I wanted to walk into a cocktail party and say I'm a director. So, I got this cognitive shift about being a teacher. So now I get to teach and give back.

**Happiness, joy, love, and peace.** Almost all of the participants experienced a newfound, deepened sense of happiness, joy, love, and peace in their lives. Those terms are used to reference the same experience of coming home within themselves and their world. Liana shared that "I know that peace isn't . . . from a particular teacher and there are teachers that made a difference but that peace is coming from within." She went on to say, "It was the only place where I experienced feelings of peace in my life."

Eli shared a particular experience of happiness and joy in one class:

> I started to cry but it was tears of joy really because I felt so good and I remember thinking wow, I am really feeling this. Just the fact that you can be in a space and close your eyes and be in a very simple position and really be doing nothing but you feel so happy.

Greg experienced this in a growing way, more generalized: "that is what the yoga does. It adds the happiness. It gives you the bliss or it uncovers the happiness. Happiness is there, you just uncover it." He also remembered the first moment he experienced being happy:

> I was with my son and we were Christmas shopping in some store where there was this little game that you could play; and we played it and I enjoyed it. I just

let go and relaxed and didn't over think it and just enjoyed it. To me that was a big sign.

Sanja expressed a similar sense, but expanded it to incorporate the sense of awareness that she experienced as part of the joy. "I just loved how the practice made me feel. It made me feel blissful. . . . It opened up an awakening and awareness that allows me to be a compassionate human being at all times."

**Summary of Themes**

A thorough description of the findings has been presented in this chapter, which emphasized participants' experiences through direct embodied excerpts. The themes of awareness, acceptance, agency, authority, allowing, appreciation, and authenticity reflect the ways in which participants experienced transformation as a result of the healing of trauma they experience through their Kundalini Yoga practice.

I do not believe the process of the Kundalini Yoga experience unfolds in a perfectly linear, chronological order. These essential pieces of the experience bleed into one another; the themes and characteristics overlap. In some ways, this made presentation of these themes a bit tricky, as I chose to separate combined strands, placing different parts of the various "wholes" of the protocols into the descriptions above.

What is abundantly clear is the transformative healing experience of the practice of Kundalini Yoga for each of the participants in this study. To move from an experience of not being able to function in the world, as Liana described, to a place of feeling at peace, at home in oneself, and aware of self, others, and world is a level of miracle that perhaps only those who have experienced it can understand in a visceral, embodied way. My intent in this study is to attempt to share this embodied experience, the entire span of

it, with others. In the next chapter, I will integrate this data with the literature, followed by looking forward to the opportunities for further inquiry for which this study has laid the groundwork.

# CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study examined and explored the lived outcomes of participants' experience of healing trauma through Kundalini Yoga. Twelve Kundalini Yoga practitioners, who claimed they experienced healing of personal trauma through their yoga practice, were interviewed in order to uncover the answer to the research question, "*What are the lived outcomes experienced by practitioners who claim healing of personal trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga*?

Kundalini Yoga is the yoga of awareness, and fittingly, the theme of awareness was a theme that pervaded all of the lived and embodied descriptions of the experience of this spiritual somatic practice. Woven into every essential healing piece of this rich fabric of lived experience is the embodied, experiential thread of Awareness. Without awareness there was no healing. Without awareness there was no growth or transformation.

The essential structures of this phenomenal experience offered a richer and deeper understanding of the healing and transformative qualities of Awareness experienced through the committed practice of Kundalini Yoga and meditation. Six emergent themes, which I've termed the six A's of Awareness, were identified in the interpretation of the lived experience of healing and transformation in the practice of Kundalini Yoga: (a) Acceptance, (b) Agency, (c) Authority, (d) Allowing, (e) Appreciation, and (f) Authenticity. As presented through the lived descriptions of the participants in Chapter 4, it was through the synthesis of uncovering these structural descriptions of the lived outcome of healing and transformation experienced through the practice of Kundalini Yoga that these essences or six themes of Awareness emerged. The following discussion

of these themes presents them in the present tense; based on the lived descriptions presented in Chapter 4, these themes are generalized, bringing the reader into the experience described by the participants in this study.

Awareness is experienced through one's connection to the body: the sensations, the feelings. That awareness of and connection to the body delivered the practitioner into the present moment experience; into a calm, clear, and connected space of *Acceptance* – accepting oneself, accepting life, and accepting the here and now. This experience of awareness as acceptance is further supported by "the feeling of home" experienced through the accepting, non-judging yoga class, group, and community. Awareness is acceptance within one Self and outside of one Self.

Awareness is experienced through the embodied practice and newly claimed understanding of being in control and having choices. Having connected to body and internal states, accepting the present for what it is, the practitioner recognized where s/he could effect change, and how that internally intended effect had external effects as well. That sense of control and responsibility empowered the practitioner and awakened her *Agency* – to consciously take care of her Self and her world.

Awareness is experienced through a shift in self-perception and an awakening into one's greatest potential. Having accepted the here and now and empowered her Self through a sense of agency, the practitioner positively recognized, experienced, and embraced her Self and her purpose with greater confidence, compassion, and esteem. As an accepting, conscious agent in her own life she recognized her own *Authority* – to be the person she is destined to be and create the world she wants to live in.

Awareness is experienced through an expanded and heightened conscious connection to Spirit, to the Universe, to Higher Power, to God. Having accepted what is, and affected what could be, the practitioner claimed her own authority to control and affect her life where she can, all the while trusting that the rest would be taken care of. As an accepting agent of authority, she humbly and faithfully found that sacred, spiritual balance in her life by *Allowing* – what is, what will be, and surrendering control of the uncontrollable with faith and trust.

Awareness is experienced through a deeper, more compassionate, more conscious connection to others in her world. Having connected to her Self and to Spirit through her acceptance of what is and her authority to affect what she can and allow what she can't, the practitioner experiences a deep *Appreciation* – for life and all those traveling through it. With the grace of appreciating others for exactly where they are and who they are, she authentically relates and connects and is driven to give back however she can.

Awareness is experienced through embodying and living these essential pieces of Body, Mind, and Spirit. By stepping into the present moment with *Acceptance* (for the Self and the here and now, recognizing one's *Agency* to effect change, embracing one's *Authority* to be all she can be, yet spiritedly *Allowing* life and the Universe to unfold as it will, and appreciating those along her path with grace, compassion, and service, the practitioner has uncovered the happiness, love, and peace existing in the core of every moment. Recognizing happiness as her birthright, she has found her way home, living in Dharma. Living in Dharma is living in awareness. Awareness is authenticity. Awareness is the authentic Self actualized.

## Integration of Findings and Research Literature

Several theoretical perspectives and fields of research were used as a framework for understanding the participants' lived outcomes experienced as a result of healing trauma through the spiritual somatic practice of Kundalini Yoga. The following sections of this chapter integrate the findings within the context of current theory and research, and discuss how the findings inform the fields of yoga, trauma, trauma treatment, posttraumatic growth, personal growth, and transformation. The sections discuss how the participants' lived experience of trauma informs and is supported by current research on trauma's effects on one's livelihood and personhood, and how the findings on the lived outcomes resulting from Kundalini Yoga practice are consistent with literature exploring the benefits of yoga and meditation and its usage as a healing modality for trauma. They further weave in how the findings inform knowledge of a spiritual somatic practice, like Kundalini Yoga, as a facilitator for posttraumatic growth and transformation. This discussion is broken down and organized using the six emergent themes or essential structures within the lived experience of outcome of healing trauma through Kundalini Yoga.

### Acceptance: Feels Like Home – a Space to Belong and Feel Accepted

> When you walk into a room, make it your home and enable everyone else to feel at home. Be at home wherever you are. (Guru Singh, Master Kundalini Yoga Teacher, class lecture, February 15, 2011)

Before the healing work began, all the participants mentioned how their yoga study or classroom offered them a safe and supportive space to reconnect to themselves and their world, and begin the journey to heal and transform. They experienced a non-

judgmental, approving community where they finally felt comfortable enough to explore their experiences. A safe and supportive environment is needed to support feeling at home within oneself (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Joseph & Linley, 2005; van der Kolk, 2006). Emerson and Hopper (2011) discussed the importance of creating a safe space where trauma survivors can practice becoming aware of their bodies, their internal states, and experience being in the present moment. It is from that supportive space that practitioners recognize they can actively choose to effect change in their bodies and their lives.

Taking effective action depends on a facilitating environment. According to a study by Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998), experiencing the psychological and emotional process of posttraumatic growth (i.e., awareness of internal states, positive shift in meaning perspectives, positive sense of self, and connection to others) without an environment that supports its related action may be a factor related to increased anxiety and distress. They found that individuals who originally saw the growth benefits post trauma, and then lost this sense of benefit because of an unsupportive environment, had the greatest increase in psychological distress. This indicates that the process of personal growth requires continuous interaction with a supportive environment (Guidano, 1991; Guidano & Liotti, 1983; Varela & Moore, 2010).

The feeling of home is one of many aspects within the Kundalini Yoga experience that may have helped to facilitate growth, based on the organismic valuing theory (OVT) framework described in Chapter 2. The organismic valuing theory posits that people are active, growth-oriented organisms that are "naturally inclined to integrate their psychological experiences into a unified sense of self" in efforts to attain personal well-

being and fulfillment (Joseph & Linley, 2005, p. 269), even after trauma. The findings of this study suggest there is a supportive environment within the Kundalini Yoga class, studio, and community that encourages the opportunity for growth. All of the participants described their experience of support through their feeling at home within the practice and its community, further informing how the support of others is needed in facilitating one's growth process (Beardslee, 1989; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Fawcett, 1994; Hirshberg & Barasch, 1995; Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

According to OVT, an individual's cognitive appraisal processes (i.e., assimilation or accommodation) and social environments are primary factors that can promote or hinder the organic process of personal growth after trauma (Joseph & Linley, 2005). A healthy social environment can aid one's ability to become aware of and accommodate the present moment, and the Kundalini Yoga class or group experience seemed to offer such a supportive environment. More specifically, participants' lived descriptions of Kundalini Yoga were aligned with OVT's description of what constitutes a social environment that would foster positive acceptance of life experience, through a supportive and emotionally validating atmosphere (Cloitre, Cohen, & Koenen, 2006). This supportive, feels-like-home atmosphere provided the psychological, emotional, and spiritual space to authentically engage in accommodating new meanings in their world, and become aware of their organismic valuing process. This meant they recognized their ability to choose how to take care of themselves in the moment and how to consciously act on their valuing process (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Feeling at home within the Kundalini Yoga class and community provided just that supportive setting.

**Lived embodiment or somatic/interoceptive awareness.** A greater connection

to one's inner experiences, including physical sensations, emotions, and the mind and body connection, was a shared experience among the participants. This connection to oneself involved an increased capacity for introspection and recognizing links between past trauma and current behaviors. Coming to such awareness was an emotionally intense experience for some participants, as they became more aware of how cut off they were from difficult emotions. One participant experienced this greater connection to inner experiences, this deepened interoceptive awareness, by recognizing how "dissociated I was all these years" (Liana).

Many participants noticed how they had been unaware of, or disconnected from their bodies and their selves before beginning their Kundalini Yoga practice and how they were now "aware" and "feeling again." For example, Jennifer shared that

> I'm in touch with all the feelings that I wasn't able to feel before. . . . I was so disconnected from my body and from my emotions at the time; and now in every moment there is so much going on within me and I am able to connect to that more and feel it. Every moment is like a new feeling – just an awareness of what's going on whether it's painful in the moment or joyful or enlightening. It's just an experience, whereas before I was just shut off.

These findings are consistent with the claims made by researchers and practitioners of yoga and meditation. For instance, many well-known yoga practitioners have posited that yoga helps to increase self-awareness, interoceptive awareness, and one's connection to the world (Arpita, 1990; Baptiste, 2002; Iyengar, et al., 2005; Schell, et al., 1994).

Research by Siegel, Germer, and Olendzki (2009) also described some of the

primary benefits of a mind-body practice as acknowledging and accepting feelings. Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the literature that suggests mindfulness practices can strengthen connections between the body and the brain (Follette & Vijay, 2008; Kempson, 2007; van der Kolk, 2006). Brain scans and neuroplasticity studies have also demonstrated that the practice of meditation strengthens areas of the brain associated with introspection, attention, and well-being (e.g., Davidson et al., 2003). Rachel expressed this very well:

> I now know when something is internally bothering me. There is not a part of my body where I now don't connect. My physical pain is deeply connected to my emotional wellbeing. As soon as I become aware of my pain and what it's connected to, my pain goes away. When it doesn't, I know that I just haven't learned the lesson yet. Through Kundalini . . . I now have this understanding of what you go through physically, what it means emotionally and if you can understand the connection between the two, how you can solve it.

This increased awareness and acceptance of feelings became a more generalized experience. An increased sense of acceptance for one's self and one's life was shared amongst the majority of the participants. Increased self-acceptance is an experience shared by many yoga practitioners, and is proposed to be one of the primary benefits of yoga (Arpita, 1990; Baptiste, 2002; Iyengar et al., 2005; Schell et al., 1994).

The experience of heightened interoceptive awareness in this study was connected to the participants' calming and balanced present-moment experience. No longer held back by haunting memories of the past, the participants were able to guide, ground, and calm themselves in the present moment. This study's findings parallel results of a

qualitative study by Deary, Roche, Plotkin, and Rothlyn (2011) with practitioners in a hatha yoga program, in which participants reported feeling more at peace with their lives and more acceptance of life's events.

***The present moment.*** As a result of their Kundalini Yoga practice, participants reported being able to direct and center themselves in a present-moment experience. Carrying an understanding of how trauma holds its victims in the past, the first goal of any healing modality in trauma treatment is to help guide survivors into the present moment without feeling or behaving according to irrelevant demands belonging to the past (van der Kolk, 2010). This gentle and restorative form of yoga, Kundalini Yoga, takes practitioners out of the chaos of their minds by offering them a present-moment experience in their bodies. Through a sequence and synchronization of breathing and moving, the yogic practitioner uses her body (interoceptive awareness) to come to present. While memories of past trauma often take over one's mind, yoga helps to bring individuals into the present moment and to the realization that each moment comes to an end, as has the trauma (Deary et al., 2011).

Before their committed Kundalini Yoga practice, the participants reported existing in a state of fear-based demands belonging to the past or fearful projections of the future. Due to the practice, they were able to guide their minds back to "now" by calling attention to what is happening "right here, right now." In that present moment experience, the majority of the practitioners reported experiencing a sense of calm in their bodies. As Damasio has explained, as the body shifts into a space of stillness, so does the mind (1999, p. 293).

This practice of being present is the bedrock for healing. It is from this place of

presence that the trauma survivor and yogic practitioner recognizes that she can choose how she wishes to respond to life (Naparstek, 2004; Scaer, 2007; van der Kolk, 2002). The centering and calming tools acquired through the Kundalini Yoga practice were carried into and used in their day-to-day experiences. For example, Rachel was able to use her breath to calm herself back to the present moment during a stressfully challenging situation.

Indeed, Rachel's example and other participants' described experiences reflect how a mindfulness practice creates balance and control as one develops the ability to manage stress and their own internal experience (Bhikkhu, 2007). These findings suggest that Kundalini Yoga not only aided in building interoceptive awareness, but also facilitated greater understanding of one's inner experiences, and a deeper sense of calm and clarity that come with connecting to the present moment.

According to Naparstek (2004), focusing on breath and internal sensations is a meditation. This meditation can teach us to watch our own suffering in the present moment with detached, neutral curiosity, going from moment to moment with compassion for ourselves. We can observe thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they come into our awareness and as they leave, always staying or returning to the present moment; we neither resist what we observe nor cling to it. Instead, we just watch, with the neutral, detached eye (Naparstek, p. 164). The tools acquired through Kundalini Yoga (breath, meditation, chanting) offered the participants a way to distance themselves from stressful and painful situations in order to transcend them.

Since Kundalini Yoga offered this present-moment awareness and diminished the amount of dissociation or time spent living life stuck in their traumatic past, the

participants began to further accept their life circumstances and recognize their choices in how to react to them. Such experiences are consistent with the literature stating that yoga facilitates greater awareness and recognition of when one's reactions are connected to the present moment or to past experience, and having the option to choose differently (Follette & Pistorello, 2007).

***Shift in meaning making and perspective.*** Meaning is the foundation underlying one's preconceptions and assumptions about how the world works. It underlies beliefs and values (Mezirow, 1991). It is an individual's point of view and filter of meaning of the world (Mead, 1934; Mezirow, 1991) that colors a person's perspective (Kegan, 1982). What a person knows about the world shapes how the world is "seen" or experienced.

Prior to their experience of healing personal trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga, the majority of the participants in this study had had a negative and rather hopeless understanding of their world. Their experience of and perspective on the world was consistent with trauma literature discussing the symptoms of depression and hopelessness many trauma survivors struggle with (Herman, 1992; Naparstek, 2004; van der Kolk, 2006). Many survivors of trauma experience spiritual questioning and a feeling of lack of purpose and meaning in life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Herman, 1992; Luxenberg et al., 2001).

With a heightened awareness of internal experiences, and the ability to experience calm and clarity in the present moment as a result of their Kundalini Yoga practice, all the participants experienced a positive shift in their perspective on life and their acceptance of life. As the participants experienced a sense of connection to their internal states and acquired the tools to direct themselves to the calming of the present-moment

experience, they began to experience the world as less threatening and unmanageable, and were able to accept life with a greater sense of peace. Through interoceptive awareness and present-moment experience, the practitioners were able to dis-identify with their suffering and see themselves as larger than their pain, allowing for a shift in how they came to make meaning of their world.

When individuals develop the ability to acknowledge their emotions in a more accepting manner, they no longer need to avoid them and can observe the consequences of reacting to these emotions, thereby developing more effective coping strategies (Baer, 2003). From a place of acceptance of self and feelings through interoceptive awareness and present-moment experience, the participants were able to recognize the opportunity to choose how they wanted to respond to life.

**Agency: Choice and Sense of Control**

In addition to a greater sense of acceptance of self and the present moment, the participants acknowledged feeling as if they became more active participants in their lives and began to see new possibilities for the future. Their lived descriptions reflected a sense of empowered agency. Their body awareness and present-moment experience strengthened the ability to tolerate and confront difficult emotions and sensations, fostering a sense of agency: recognizing choice and the ability to take care of oneself by taking effective action. The skills gained through their Kundalini Yoga, and the application of these skills to their day-to-day lives, fostered a sense of agency and control. For instance, participants described a newfound realization that they had control over the choices they make.

Since at the root of trauma is an experience of helplessness that involves extreme lack of choice, to know and to feel that one has control and the choice to self-regulate is a huge sign of growth in trauma recovery (Naparstek, 2004). The study participants shared their experiences of re-empowerment as they regained power and control through the choices they were now able to recognize. Along with the recognition of choice and control over one's choices came the opportunity to take effective action.

***Taking effective action/affect regulation.*** Difficulties connecting to and dealing with emotions posed significant problems for most of the participants in the aftermath of trauma, as they described their methods of disconnecting rather than regulating their emotional states. However, the majority of the participants described an increase in their ability to regulate emotion as a result of the Kundalini Yoga tools and techniques they carried with them off the mat.

The skills gained through yoga, and the application of these skills to other aspects of life, fostered a sense of agency. In other words, participants began to see how they could use their body and their breath as a resource for affect management and emotion regulation. This empowering experience offered participants a sense of safety and comfort when experiencing and confronting difficult emotions. Participants were able to take effective action to manage feelings, feel comfortable with stressful situations, and even elicit a sense of calm in the midst of it.

These findings reflect some of the major benefits of a mindfulness practice, as described by Siegel and colleagues (2009), including regulating or experiencing emotions rather than attempting to control them. Controlled breathing is also intended to enhance one's ability to balance physiological patterns as well as mental and physical relaxation

(Ware, 2007). Baer's (2003) proposition that acceptance and awareness of emotion allows for greater tolerance of emotion and reduced likelihood of being triggered by intense emotion also appears to be consistent with the current findings. Many of the participants described each of these benefits, and illustrated how they became more aware of feeling states, learned to accept (rather than reject or avoid) their feelings, and gained skills to manage their emotion, for example, "With breath I am able to recognize and yet not get so attached to the difficult emotions and just really experience all of it" (Jennifer).

The lived descriptions in this study imply that Kundalini Yoga has the capacity to reduce hyperarousal and affect dysregulation, as well as help participants build the skills to effectively tolerate difficult emotion (e.g., through breath and body). These findings are consistent with knowledge of the disciplines of somaesthetic awareness, which are aimed not simply at knowing and acknowledging the bodily condition and habits, but also at changing them (Shusterman, 2008). Several participants described the sense of autonomy they experienced in knowing they had the choice and the ability to effect change in their lives to feel better.

The tools of effective action such as breath, meditation, or chanting a mantra, proved to soothe and calm the mind. Eli equated it to tuning your dial to a different channel or frequency in order to enter a state of peace and stillness. This experience of accessing peace so quickly and easily, by a simple act of breath and mind focus, "provides a return to a sense of competence and mastery; delivers power and control back to them and in this way helps them retrieve self-esteem, confidence, and faith in the future" (Naparstek, 2004, p. 161).

**Authority: A Positive and Purposeful Sense of Self**

It is of great significance that every single one of the participants experienced an increased positive and purposeful sense of self as a result of their experience of Kundalini Yoga. Many participants experienced more self-love and appreciation for themselves and where they'd been. They also shared a greater sense of confidence in their ability to make conscious choices to better manage their lives. This self-love, appreciation, and confidence ignited a deeper sense of direction for their future and purpose in their lives.

These findings suggest the potential for Kundalini Yoga to be used as a healing modality to help alter the negative self-perceptions resulting from trauma, and facilitate further personal growth from that new positive shift in one's sense of self. These positive changes in self-perception are consistent with those defined in posttraumatic growth literature, where a trauma survivor can shift from a place of victimhood to survivorship, which includes a greater sense of hope, self-confidence, and new purposeful directions in life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

As Holocaust survivor and logotherapist Victor Frankl stated, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves" (Frankl, 1984, p. 116). The study participants learned to accept their posttraumatic life circumstances and recognized any change towards healing and growth would have to begin with themselves. Their acquired agency and authority to take back the reins in their lives led them from a life defined by tragedy to one defined by triumph.

**Self-confidence and expression**. As participants began to feel more confident in their abilities to successfully use the tools they learned, in yoga class and in life, they also became more comfortable in expressing themselves. This sense of authority enabled

them to set healthy boundaries, effectively communicate their needs to others, and open dialogue with important others in their lives. This was useful in various interpersonal situations. As Yogi Bajan has said,

> The kundalini experience does not mean you have gone into a deep breathless trance and are beyond this world. . . . It integrates you more fully with reality and gives you a broader vision and sensitivity so that you can act more efficiently (2003, p. 145).

**Allowing: Connection to Spirit**

> Healing is embracing what is most feared. Healing is opening what has been closed, softening what has been hardened into obstruction. Healing is learning to trust life. (Achterberg, 2002, p. 79)

Prior to their Kundalini Yoga practice, most of the participants shared their experience of disconnection not only from themselves, but from any sense of faith and spirituality. Many had disconnected from any acceptance or experience of God or the Universe or a Higher Power. These experiences are supported by literature discussing how trauma can lead to spiritual or religious questioning and existential isolation (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Herman, 1992; Luxenberg et al., 2001).

As a result of their experience of Kundalini Yoga, almost all of the participants experienced a heightened consciousness, which included stronger connection to God and the Universe, and a deeper sense of faith and trust in life, the universe, and the future. This spiritual awakening or strengthening also enabled their ability to examine and experience their lives from a place of expanded awareness as an observer.

Several of the participants reported feeling less alone in their day-to-day world. The participants described shifts in their perspectives on life that had a more spiritual or existential quality, such as a deeper connection to the Universe or God. This is consistent with Richo's work (1991) on personal growth and transformation as liberation of the ego, revealing us to ourselves as singular and as one with all that is (p. 58).

These findings suggest that the committed practice of Kundalini Yoga can result in the capacity of empowering participants through a sense of agency and control, while connecting them to a spiritual something to whom they could surrender control. This spiritual connection supported their acceptance of a meaningful future. The participants' significant growth from a place of depression, hopelessness, and spiritual despair before their committed practice to a lived outcome connected to spirituality, faith, hope, and trust is consistent with posttraumatic growth theory (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). This theory describes growth as including one's finding a deeper purpose, greater optimism, and a deeper spiritual understanding.

Letting go of control did not mean letting go of the need to become informed, make decisions, and do what they could to take care of themselves. It meant letting go of an unrealistic need to control the uncontrollable. This experience is consistent with literature on developmental psychology and one's path of self-actualization. Many posit how letting go of control can seem like a spiritual experience because of the relief and sense of self-expansion it creates by giving the uncontrollable to God or the universe (Richo, 1991; Fromm, 2011; Maslow, 2011). In his phenomenological study of the experience of male cancer survivors, Dudley Tower (2000) discussed the experience of moving from isolation and separation to connection, and shared how, during a

participant's posttraumatic growth journey, he "discovers that he is somehow linked to other people and a spiritual realm" (Tower, p. 166).

Based on these findings, it is not surprising that an increasingly positive self-perception, optimism for life, and a deeper spiritual connection would affect one's ability to show up fully and authentically within one's interpersonal relationships and experience a greater connection to others. This is discussed below.

**Appreciation: Connection to Others**

Consistent with findings from many researchers of trauma, while describing their experiences of living in the aftermath of their personal traumas, most of the participants described feeling isolated and alone. Many felt they were different and hence felt disconnected from other people (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Fleming, Mullen, Sibrhrope, & Bammer, 1999; Herman, 1992; Luxenberg et al., 2001; van der Kolk, et al., 2005). However, as a result of their Kundalini Yoga practice, the majority of the participants reported a stronger sense of connection not only to themselves, their inner experiences, and spiritual existence, but a stronger connection to others.

In particular, as a couple of the participants developed a deeper connection to their internal experiences and present-moment experiences, and developed a positive, more compassionate perception of themselves, they began to engage more authentically in relationships. This was experienced in the deepening of personal relationships with family and significant others, such as in feeling more comfortable with the vulnerability that comes with intimacy. These findings substantiate previous research that has found a positive correlation between one's attunement to and acceptance of internal states and activation of brain regions associated with feelings of connection to others (Siegel, 2007).

Many of the participants shared their willingness to commit to greater intimacy and authentic communication. These experiences of greater connection to oneself and others support van der Kolk's (2006) hypothesis that an individual may find deeper connections in relationships as one becomes more aware of one's internal experience. These findings are also consistent with studies that suggest that a strong mind-body connection can lead to stronger interpersonal relationships, and heighten one's sense of interconnectedness to other living beings and the universe overall (Ware, 2007). Furthermore, these findings substantiate previous mindfulness research that has found a positive correlation between attunement to internal states and activation of brain regions associated with feelings of connectedness to others (Siegel, 2007).

**Seva and helping others**. Nearly all of the participants experienced a desire and/or sense of duty to give back to others, through service (or seva). These findings support posttraumatic growth research discussing how many trauma survivors successfully transform and heal trauma through finding meaning and purpose in helping others (Baures, 1994). They suggest that in the course of healing their trauma, these participants developed some of the characteristics of self-actualization, such as clearer, more efficient perception of reality, more openness to experience, increased integration, wholeness and unity, and increased objectivity, detachment, and transcendence of self (Maslow, 2011, pp. 120-121).

**Authenticity: Happiness, Joy, Love, and Peace**

> The secret in learning to be happy is unlearning the reasons that you're not.
>
> (Guru Singh Khalsa, class lecture, February 15, 2011)

Having come from a disconnected and despairingly depressed state after their

personal traumas, the majority of the participants experienced an overall sense of happiness, joy, love, and/or peace as a result of their Kundalini Yoga practice. Those terms were used to reference the same experience of coming home within themselves and their world.

**Living in awareness uncovers an authentic state of happiness.** The participants' lived outcome of the experience of healing personal trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga practice was demonstrated through a commitment to living an authentic life: where one is truthfully and consciously connected to one self, to God, and to others. Discovering and embracing one's authentic self (home) involved connecting to one's inner experiences and present moment experiences and recognizing one's agency to consciously take action to affect change in one's life. It also involved developing a positive sense of and acceptance of self and life, with a deepened sense of purpose and a greater sense of trust, faith, and spirituality, and an authentic connection to others. This actualized experience of oneself as a result of the Kundalini Yoga practice supports posttraumatic research that calls levels of growth self-renewal, where new levels of awareness develop including stronger sense of self, deeper spiritual connection, and healthier interpersonal relationships (Jaffe, 1985, p. 101).

This is in no way implying that happiness and only happiness exists at the end of "a Kundalini rainbow" as a result of Kundalini Yoga. Practitioners don't evolve into Pollyanna versions of themselves. Instead, it is their heightened sensitivity (their interoceptive awareness), deeper connection to their internal senses/feelings (good or bad), strengthened connection to others and the universe that remind them that they are

alive. Happiness stems from recognizing that they are no longer numb and merely existing through life, but rather, fully alive, vitally alive, and living in awareness.

It is through that lived and embodied awareness that one consciously commits to becoming all that she was destined to be. In her commitment to actualize and embrace that destined Self with each conscious breath of spirit, she is brought back to the calming clarity of the moment, where she uncovers what is always hidden at its core: happiness.

## Kundalini Yoga as Healing Modality for Trauma and Life Tool Set for Facilitating Personal Growth and Transformation

The participants' experience of healing and personal growth supports how focusing on the body, rather than on cognition or emotion, is a helpful first step in treating the effects of trauma on the body, which in turn helps in processing trauma and facilitating psychological, emotional, and spiritual growth. That is, the body-mind-spirit-based intervention of Kundalini Yoga helped participants identify and acknowledge emotional and bodily states, build skills to tolerate and appropriately respond to these sensations, and feel safe in doing so.

As discussed in Chapter 2, theories of posttraumatic growth described growth as positive changes in the domains of self-perception, interpersonal connections, and philosophy of life (Joseph & Linley, 2006). The sections above provide a thorough review of participants' experiences in these three domains, but their descriptions were not limited to growth in just these life domains. In addition to experiencing growth in these three domains, the participants also described areas of growth in the forms of connection to Spirit and faith in something greater than themselves; acceptance of oneself through greater self-understanding, and a deeper connection to one's inner experiences; a greater sense of being in the present; an integrated sense of agency and authority through

recognition of choice and control in their lives; and viewing themselves as tools for effective action.

The findings seem to suggest that the practice of Kundalini Yoga is a very relevant fit to healing trauma and facilitating personal growth. Kundalini Yoga is not only healing in mind, body, and spirit, but an effective growth-fostering intervention. For instance, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004a) have suggested that therapeutic interventions can foster growth by helping clients "rebuild their self-structures by reintegrating self with experience" (Joseph & Linley, 2006, p. 1049).

Through their Kundalini Yoga experiences, the participants reported that some of the primary struggles related to trauma were dissipated, partly due to their ability to experience awareness through acceptance, agency, authority, allowing, appreciation, and authenticity. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) stated that people have a tendency to experience trauma in a manner that produces a perception of benefit. Kundalini Yoga appears to facilitate the creation of that perception for the participants in this study.

Yoga is part of an ancient system meant precisely to address human suffering, and particularly to address it in the body, where it lives (Phillips, 2009). Kundalini Yoga, a practice which focuses on the mind (meditation, mantra), body (asanas), and spirit (breath), can target the whole distressing embodiment of trauma (physiological, mental, emotional, and spiritual), as well as its interrelated problems (poor self-perception, psychosocial functioning, and lack of interoceptive awareness). The participants in this study certainly reported on all of these aspects, and the combination of them with their experience that yoga classes provided a supportive, beneficial place for healing trauma and promoting growth.

> In a 2010 lecture on trauma, Bessel van der Kolk explained how
>
> Trauma treatment needs to address certain issues in order to help patients that include regaining a sense of safety in their own bodies, instilling a sense of agency and self control and completing their unfinished pasts and connecting to the present. (van der Kolk, 2010)

These trauma-sensitive issues are addressed within a Kundalini Yoga class or practice by enabling the practitioners' own ability to feel safe, regulate affective states (like calming oneself), take effective action, practice making choices, and have a present moment experience, all offering an empowering sense of self-control and awareness (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; van der Kolk, 2010). Healing these layers of traumatic pain enables the practitioner to reconnect, to be in union, "in yoga" with his or her Infinite Self and consciousness and human potential. These tools re-instill faith in our inherent human potential, and remind us how our life traumas and crises can be that catalyst to initiate one's journey to healing and transformation (self-actualization); (Bhajan, 2003; D. Khalsa, 2002; Feuerstein, 1998; van der Kolk, 2010).

If trauma is the stimulus that broke us open, initiating the journey, then Kundalini Yoga can be the healing and transformative tool supporting our journey home to dharma: living a life of awareness and self-actualization. We thus become what Jaffe (1985) termed "effective survivors." Effective survivors look for meaning, reach beyond the trauma and connect themselves to greater potential, to something profound. They transcend, seek a purpose, achieve vitality and integrity. They take a more detached view of life, through which they continue to grow and change (Jaffe, 1985).

## A Possible Limitation and Possibilities for Future Research

As I reflected on this study, a possible limitation to the study came up. All of the participants in this study were not only from my local Los Angeles area, but also from two specific yoga studios in this area. This might have affected the study. Is it possible that there might have been differences in experiences of healing from trauma through Kundalini Yoga if I had interviewed people from different geographic areas, and a number of different yoga studios? What might be the differences in different studios, and the teachers in those studios? Is it possible that such differences in the studios and the teachers themselves might affect the sense of safety in the group, and thus the ability to heal? This raises some interesting possibilities for future research.

These findings also offer implications for practice, particularly the space created for Kundalini Yoga practice. All the participants described the home-like environment of the studio and classroom. This accepting, non-judgmental space provided a space of comfort and safety for the practitioners to connect to their feelings and experience the difficult experiences. These findings can help support the set-up and development of a safe and sacred space to teach Kundalini Yoga that fosters and supports the practitioner's experience of the flood of emotions that arise during practice. They also suggest possible research into the qualities of teachers and teachings, as well as the qualities of the space itself that influence the potential for healing through Kundalini Yoga.

In this study of the lived outcome of the experience of healing personal trauma through Kundalini Yoga, several themes emerged as essential to the experience. These thematic findings offer implications for future research. For example, the majority of the participants experienced a spiritual awakening or deepening of faith, suggesting a

research exploration of the experience of trust and faith in Spirit (God or the Universe or a Higher Power) through a somatic practice. Another theme that emerged within the shared experiences was a deeper appreciation of and connection to others in their world, encouraging further inquiry about the human relationships and connections that change through yoga practice.

Within this study, participants all richly described the outcome of their having healed trauma as a result of their committed Kundalini Yoga practice. These participants shared their healing and transformative experiences of anywhere from a year to a decade after their consistent practice (and healing) began. How might findings differ if participants in a study were interviewed while in the midst of the initial stages of their practice? This question piques further curiosity about a possible future phenomenological study that uncovers "the what" of the healing experience during the practice. A deeper level phenomenological study would be able to uncover "what" it was that caused the practitioners' healing, growth, and transformation. Perhaps an extensive study covering participants' experiences during the 9-month Aquarian Teacher training program could explore the essential structures while in practice (getting lived descriptions directly after a meditation, kriya, pranayam, or entire Kundalini class, covering the span of the 9-month training).

The participants of this study also described the benefits of their acquired Kundalini Yoga tools that aided their coming into a clear and calm present state from which to affect change in their lives. They shared the applicability of meditation, pranayam, mantra, asana, and sadhana off the mat and in their daily lives. These findings have implications for research that can further examine each of these yogic techniques

within the expansive technology of Kundalini Yoga, perhaps to uncover which specific postures, mantras, meditation, and pranayam have what effects, and/or to discover whether it is the practice as a whole that makes the difference for people. Research such as this would further support the knowledge of the effectiveness and relevance of Kundalini Yoga as a healing modality in trauma recovery, as well as potentially provide applicable knowledge of specific yogic techniques.

Several of the participants also described having come from a place of significant physical illness and shared how their experience of the practice seemed to have helped rapidly heal their symptoms beyond what medicine or time would have facilitated. These findings have implications for future research that can explore the use of a spiritual somatic practice in facilitating the healing of specific physical conditions.

Throughout most of this study, I have referred to Kundalini Yoga as a spiritual somatic practice. With the research in human development, posttraumatic growth, and trauma recovery, it might be interesting to find out whether other spiritual somatic practices exist, perhaps from other spiritual traditions, and to see whether those also had similar effects in healing trauma. Another possible direction would be to find whether there are those who have found themselves healing from trauma using separate spiritual and somatic approaches during the same time in their healing process.

**Significant Finding**

The thing that struck me as I looked back at the study is how all of the participants experienced characteristics of self-actualization and deep spirituality as a result of their Kundalini Yoga practice. These participants didn't just heal from trauma, they moved a step further into a place of having a number of Maslow's characteristics of

self-actualization (Maslow, 2011), and into what Seligman termed a "meaningful life" and "the good life" (Seligman, 2002). This is another possible area for future research: whether others who heal from trauma are also able to gain characteristics of self-actualization. Does the healing of trauma involve self-actualization? In the participants' experience of healing trauma they moved from an inability to function in the world to moving beyond functioning to thriving in a self-actualized, spiritual way. Does that healing and transforming from trauma into Maslow's levels of self-actualization require a somatic component, a spiritual component, or a combination of the two? One or more future studies could explore these questions. It might also be worth looking at, in future studies, a connection between the healing of trauma and the movement into a practical, lived spirituality.

**In Summary: Kundalini Yoga and Awareness**

The data richly uncovered an aspect of healing, transforming, and thriving beyond trauma which involved discovering a way to come to Awareness. Awareness is the yogic fabric woven by the experiential components or threads of the Kundalini Yoga experience. Embodying awareness is the essential nature of the lived outcome of healing trauma through the practice of Kundalini Yoga. The essential components of awareness that happen through the experience are demonstrated through the lived themes. The themes of acceptance, agency, authority, allowing, appreciation, and authenticity demonstrated the lived experience of awareness.

Kundalini Yoga is an effective technology that involves a sequence of postures, breath, mudras, and mantras that positively affect the nervous system. The use of breath calms and stills the mind; mantras enable us to reach a state of emotional neutrality; and

meditation balances and clears self-defeating thought patterns and habitual behaviors. This technology offered these participants an experience of embodied awareness that resulted in their healing trauma and transforming their lives.

As resilient human beings, we can do extraordinary things in the face of challenging circumstances, if we have access to the tools. Kundalini Yoga offers us the tools, and awakens us to recognize that those tools are within ourselves. Kundalini Yoga offers the practitioner a path of embodied awareness, offering tools to put awareness into practice every day. There are vast changes afoot and opportunities for enlightenment along the horizon of our consciousness; consciously connecting to our breath and our body is half the journey.

## In Closing: My Experience as Scholar Practitioner

This dissertation journey has been about conscious, transformative movement: movement from within and without. It has involved letting go of that resistant, white-knuckled grip around old, comfortable, habitual ways of knowing and opening myself up to learning, experiencing, and moving through the new and unfamiliar with new, fresh eyes. I equate delving into the data collection and analysis to a new, never-before-tried yoga pose. The first resistant thought my mind spits out is, "How can I possibly bend and stretch my body in such a way?! This doesn't fit into what I know to do?!" And right then I recognize the trappings of my habitual mind rejecting all things outside my comfortable paradigm of thinking and being.

There begins the yogic practice of pranayam or conscious breathing. "The mind follows the breath. The key to controlling the mind is controlling the breath" (Bhajan, 2003, p. 129). Through conscious breathing, I committed to bracketing and stripping my

mind of stale assumptions and attitudes and easing my way (in time) into the information with curiosity, with patience, with discipline, and with compassion. Every twist and turn along this journey of mine has required my surrender, trust, curiosity, patience, discipline, and compassion, which in turn has enabled me to bend and angle my mind, body, and soul in the most transformative way. Phenomenological research is an act of love. It requires surrender, trust and patience; it requires humility and deepened intimacy.

What I am clear on is that I wouldn't have gotten here without commitment: commitment to my relationship with my daily Kundalini practice. A relationship is a skill, and like any skill it requires practice, practice, practice. It requires commitment.

As I considered the world of the scholar practitioner, I recognized the impressive responsibility we assume in our scholarly attempts at expanding, creating, and applying knowledge. I remember Jeremy Shapiro quoting Jurgen Habermas as saying, "Knowledge takes on different forms depending on what we want to do with it" (Habermas, 1984, p. 113). We are responsible for the knowledge we acquire and the knowledge we create. Before we can decipher what we wish to do and where we wish to go with the knowledge we generate, we must acknowledge who we are and where we are coming from.

Our responsibility for the dissemination of knowledge begins with our responsibility to ourselves. The responsible scholar practitioner must be willing to claim her authentic selfhood if she hopes to leave a constructive and productive mark within the social science frontier (Palmer, 2000, p. 32). Thierry Pauchant made a statement during my first Summer Session research workshop and it has remained my motto ever since:

"To be a researcher is to be a good, responsible human being." Becoming a scholar-practitioner is a conscious and reflective choice; it is a way of being human in the most humane way.

This transformative scholar-practitioner journey has required me to tap into my authentic self, and this commitment has brought serenity and purpose to my life and clarity and courage to my role as a scholar practitioner. By being in yoga or union with my authentic self, I am able to reach out and serve others, and reinforce that "link between selfhood and service" (Palmer, 2000, p. 31). Becoming a scholar practitioner is a conscious and reflective choice I am privileged to make. And while this doctoral quest is recognized as a "mindful inquiry," I have come to embrace it as a heart-full one as well. I would not be doing others or myself scholarly justice without acknowledging my research as a heart-full pursuit. I intend to proceed down this post-doctoral road of a scholar practitioner with a full and open heart; for only then can I receive the knowledge that awaits me with clarity, project my findings through consciousness, and deliver my self to "the place where my deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Buechner, 1993, p. 119).

**A Prayer for You**

May the longtime sun shine upon you
All love surround you
And the pure light within you
Guide your way on

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# APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

## (TO BE REFFERRED TO AND USED ONLY IF SUPPORT FOR RICHER DISCOURSE IS REQUIRED)

### INTRODUCTION SECTION

_____Participant Name___,

Through these years as a Kundalini Yoga teacher and practitioner I am heartened and inspired by this yogic technology and its healing and transformative effects as experienced within my Self, and witnessed through the journey of my students and fellow practitioners alike. I want to know more about this somatic process and how a practitioner may experience healing trauma through a sequence and synchronization of breath, posture, mudra and mantra.

For my dissertation I intend on examining the lived experience of Kundalini yoga practitioners such as yourself whose committed yoga practice may have helped heal past trauma and promote transformation. The experience of trauma is complex. Trauma varies in type, source, chronicity, and impact. A wide-range of situations can catalyze trauma and the post-traumatic stress that ensues. Be it a threat to life or emotional and bodily integrity or a close encounter with violence and death, trauma arrests the course of normal development by it repetitive intrusion into a survivor's life, threatening one's physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual safety. For the purposes of this research study I use trauma expert Belleruth Naparstek's definition as the foundation upon which I build my understanding of trauma. "Trauma, by its very nature, is a situation of feeling an outsize helplessness and a paralysis in our ability to affect a situation." I understand trauma as some life-changing event, occurrence or experience that has left a human being feeling helpless and immobilized- stuck in the memory of the past and unable to connect to the present. Trauma specialist and psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk explains it best, "Trauma is no longer about what happened in the past, but the residue or tyranny of the past left in the present body." My doctoral research is designed to understand the role of a somatic practice such as Kundalini Yoga as a valuable adjunctive therapy in trauma recovery.

For the next two hours I will be talking with you about your life, about the trauma(s) you have experienced, your continued recovery through it, your experience of practicing Kundalini yoga and meditation, the outcome of that experience, and what meaning it all has for you in your life. Before we begin the interview we will take a few minutes to tune into a Kundalini Meditation in order to create an inner- space of stillness and clarity and conscious state of presence from which to access your experience.

We are clear that you have signed the Consent Form, and I am hopeful that you will embrace this interview as a worthwhile experience. I do want to reiterate that if, at any time, you wish to end the interview or stop participating in this research study, please let me know, and I will honor that request.

**TIME FOR MEDITATION**

Pranayam: Long Deep Breathing

Tuning in with the Adi Mantra: Invoking the Divine Wisdom within

Chanting the Mangala Charn Mantra: Asking for protection during this journey

Are you ready to begin? Are you prepared to uncover and go deeper inside yourself?

**INTRODUCTORY QUESTION:**

So, How did you get involved in Kundalini Yoga?

**TRAUMA QUESTIONS: PROMPTS & REMINDERS**

Let's make sure we're both aligned with our initial focus.

My assumption about the trauma we'll be discussing is ___trauma_____. Is that correct?

I would love to get a sense of your life before this happened. Tell me a little bit about your life before (growing up, family, friends, work, etc.)

And then ___trauma_____ happened. Can you tell me more about that?

How did you react, deal and cope?

What was your experience?

How did you feel about the whole traumatic experience?

How did you feel in your body?

How did the trauma and your way of coping change aspects of your life?

1) Sense of Self 2) Your experience of your body 3) Relationships with others (family & friends) 4) Career/Work/Purpose 5) Perspective & Understanding of the world/life

Where was your mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual state during and after the trauma?

Did you seek out modes of healing and therapy? What helped and what didn't?

**KUNDALINI YOGA AND MEDITATION EXPERIENCE & LIFE NOW: PROMPTS AND REMINDERS**

What led you to Kundalini Yoga and Meditation? Why did you start this yoga practice?

What was the frequency of our practice? (every day; once a week?)

What has the process (and unfolding) of your Kundalini Yoga practice been like for you? (Highs? Lows? Negatives? Positives? )

During the practice how and what were your experiences that lead to shifts? (Aha-moments, breakthroughs?) During a kriya, pranayam, or meditation?

Was there a defining moment during your Kundalini yoga practice when you realized, "wow, this works!"? What was that experience? And 'what' was it working?

How did you feel about yourself and your life before you started this practice?

How has this practice helped your healing process?

How did you experience the healing? (Did you experience a change in you? Your outlook, your perspective?)

How did the healing contribute to and change your perspective and experience of:

1) Sense of Self 2) Your experience of your body 3) Relationships with others (family & friends) 4) Career/Work/Purpose 5) Perspective & Understanding of the world/life?

How did your experience affect you emotionally, physically, psychologically and spiritually? What did the experience of healing and growth in those areas feel like?

In your experience how would you best describe the practice of Kundalini Yoga? And what the experience has meant to you in your life?

What is your Kundalini Yoga practice like now? How have you incorporated it in your life? (How often do you practice? When do you find yourself turning to it?)

How do you feel about yourself and your life today?

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Or ask me?

Let's close off this session with our Closing Prayer: A Longtime Sun

**CONCLUSION SECTION**

Thank you so much for your willingness and courage to share your story with me.

We have spent the past 2 hours traveling to some very raw and vulnerable places. I will plan on checking in with you in the next few days during a follow up-phone call to see how you are feeling and processing, and to offer you another opportunity to share or add anything else we may have missed or that may have just re-surfaced.

Within the next month after I complete all my interviews, I will send you a transcript of your interview for you to read for correctness. I will then set up a time to call you for a follow-up conversation over the phone to clarify, fill in gaps, review corrections and reflections together.

I cannot thank you enough. I want to say again that what you've told me will be held in complete confidence. Do you have any other questions before we end?

## APPENDIX B

## INTRODUCTORY EMAIL/INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear ____Name of Participant_____,

Thank you for your interest and enthusiasm around my doctoral research study at Fielding Graduate University, and for considering to be a part of it.

Through these years as a Kundalini Yoga teacher and practitioner I am heartened and inspired by this yogic technology and its healing and transformative effects as experienced within my Self, and witnessed through the journey of my students and fellow practitioners alike. Trauma, Post Traumatic Growth and Yoga research are woven into the fabric of my personal, scholarly and professional life.

For my dissertation I intend on examining the lived experience of Kundalini yoga practitioners whose committed yoga practice helped heal past traumas and promote transformation. I want to know more about this somatic process and how a practitioner may experience healing (of residual trauma) through a sequence and synchronization of breath, posture, mudra and mantra. My doctoral purpose is to highlight and promote the importance of the use of a somatic practice such as Kundalini Yoga as a valuable adjunctive therapy in trauma recovery.

I would love your participation. Your participation in the study would involve a small commitment of your time and an expansive amount of your willingness to share your experience with me to further support the fields of yoga and trauma research and the marriage of the two. You can expect to participate in one in-depth, face-to-face interview, as well as a ½ hour post-interview follow up phone call and a post-data collection phone call to clarify, fill in gaps and review corrections and reflections. I will also be available to talk at anytime throughout the study. The interview session will require two hours of your time, and will include the interview and a Kundalini meditation. The phone call sessions will require ½ hour your time each. There will also be a preparatory email or phone call before the interview that will offer you an explanation and discussion of my study.

By getting involved in this study, and sharing your experience, your participation will help inform, expand, and enhance the public's awareness, perception and understanding of Kundalini Yoga and Meditation (as taught by Yogi Bhajan) and its potential as an effective tool to heal trauma and transform lives.

Attached is an Informed Consent Form Fielding Graduate University required e prior to our interviews. Please sign and date it, and return one copy to me in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope I have sent you. The other copy is for your files. I will plan on emailing you to confirm our interview appointment. I look forward to our time and conversation. Please call me if you have any questions or concerns, 310-963-6975.

With gratitude,

Azita Nahai

# APPENDIX C

Fielding Graduate University

## Informed Consent Form

Trauma to Dharma: A Phenomenological Study of the Practice of Kundalini Yoga and Meditation as taught by Yogi Bhajan

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Azita Nahai, a doctoral student in the School of Human and Organizational Development at Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA. This study is supervised by Dr. Valerie Bentz. This research involves the study of Kundalini Yoga practitioners whose committed practice helped heal past traumas and promote transformation, and is part of Azita Nahai's Fielding dissertation. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a Kundalini yoga practitioner who has experienced a particular life trauma in the past and attribute part of your healing to your dedicated yoga practice.

The study involves your participation in one in-depth, face-to-face interview, as well as post-interview follow up phone call and a post-data collection phone call, to be arranged at your convenience.

There will be a preparatory email and/or phone call that will offer you an explanation and discussion of my study.

The interview session will require two hours of your time, and will include the interview and a Kundalini meditation.

The post-interview follow-up phone call will require ½ hour of your time to see how you are feeling and processing, and to offer you another opportunity to share or add anything else we may have missed or that may have just re-surfaced.

The post-data collection phone call will also require about ½ hour of your time to clarify, fill in gaps, and review corrections and reflections.

The total time involved in participation will be approximately four to five hours over the course of a month.

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. The informed consent forms and other identifying information will be kept separate from the data. All materials will be kept stored in a locked file cabinet and/or a locked computerized database (secured with a password). The audio recordings will be listened to only by Azita Nahai, the Dissertation Chair and Azita Nahai's confidential Research Assistant/Transcriber who has signed the attached Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement. Any records

that would identify you as a participant in this study, such as informed consent forms, will be destroyed by Azita Nahai approximately 5 years after the study is completed.

You will be asked to provide a different name for any quotes that might be included in the final research report. If any direct quotes will be used, permission will be sought from you first.

The results of this research will be published in my dissertation and possibly in subsequent journals or books.

You may develop greater personal awareness of your life experience as a result of your participation in this research. The risks to you are considered minimal, and there is a small chance that you may experience some emotional discomfort during or after your participation. Should you experience such discomfort, please contact Azita Nahai for a list of therapists

You may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after your participation, without negative consequences. Should you withdraw, your data will be eliminated from the study and will be destroyed.

No compensation will be provided for participation.

You may request a copy of the summary of the final results by indicating your interest at the end of this form.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this study or your involvement, please tell the Researcher before signing this form. You may also contact the supervising faculty if you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study. The supervising faculty has provided contact information at the bottom of this form.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, contact the Fielding Graduate University IRB by email at irb@fielding.edu or by telephone at 805-898-4033.

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided. Please sign both, indicating you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research. Return one to the researcher and keep the other for your files. The Institutional Review Board of Fielding Graduate University retains the right to access the signed informed consent forms and other study documents.

_____

NAME OF PARTICIPANT (please print)

_____

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

_____
DATE

Dr. Valerie Bentz,

Fielding Graduate University
2112 Santa Barbara Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93105
805-687-1099

Azita Nahai,

432 Smithwood Drive
Beverly Hills, CA 90212
310-963-6975

Yes, please send a summary of the study results to:

_____
NAME (please print)

_____
Street Address

_____
City, State, Zip

## APPENDIX D

### Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement

Trauma to Dharma: A Phenomenological Study of the Practice of Kundalini Yoga and Meditation as taught by Yogi Bhajan

Azita Nahai

I have agreed to assist Azita Nahai in her research study on the lived experience of Kundalini Yoga practitioners in the role of _____(e.g., transcriber, interpreter, research assistant).

I understand that all participants in this study have been assured that their responses will be kept confidential. I agree to maintain that confidentiality. I agree that no materials will remain in my possession beyond the operation of this research study. I further agree that I will make no independent use of any of the research materials from this project.

Signature_____

Date_____

Printed Name_____

Title _____

# APPENDIX E

## INTRODUCTORY EMAIL FOR RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Dear ____Name of Potential Participant_____,

Thank you for your interest and enthusiasm around my doctoral research study at Fielding Graduate University.

Through these years as a Kundalini Yoga teacher and practitioner I am heartened and inspired by this yogic technology and its healing and transformative effects as experienced within my Self, and witnessed through the journey of my students and fellow practitioners alike. Trauma, Post Traumatic Growth and Yoga research are woven into the fabric of my personal, scholarly and professional life.

For my dissertation I intend on examining the lived experience of Kundalini yoga practitioners, twenty years old and older, who have been committed to their yoga practice for a minimum of nine months. I am looking for practitioners whose committed yoga practice helped heal past traumas and promote transformation. I want to know more about this somatic process and how a practitioner may experience healing (of residual trauma) through a sequence and synchronization of breath, posture, mudra and mantra. *What is the experience of practicing and training in Kundalini Yoga? What happens within that experience that is healing and transformative?* My doctoral research is designed to understand the role of the use of a somatic practice such as Kundalini Yoga as a valuable adjunctive therapy in trauma recovery. Does this resonate with you?

The purpose of this study is to delve deeper into the lived experience of the yogic practitioner who has suffered from and is healing past trauma. Did the past trauma you experienced leave you grappling to make sense of a newly insecure and unfamiliar world? And an insecure and unfamiliar YOU? Along this tender recovery road where does Kundalini Yoga fit in? And do you feel your Kundalini Yoga practice has helped you heal?

I am looking for practitioners who have suffered through and survived a past trauma, and who see themselves as having journeyed a great distance, and attribute part of their healing and transformation to their dedicated practice of Kundalini Yoga and Meditation. Does that in any way describe you and your journey? If so, I would love to hear your story. I would appreciate learning more about your experience, and consider your participation in the research study.

Your participation in the study will require a small commitment of your time and an expansive amount of your willingness to share your experience with me to further support the fields of yoga and trauma research. You can expect to participate in one preparatory phone call or email exchange, one in-depth, face to face interview, as well as a follow up post-interview phone call and a post-data collection follow-up phone call to clarify, fill in gaps, and review corrections and reflections. I will also be available to talk at anytime throughout the study. The interview session will require two hours of your

time, and will include the interview and a Kundalini meditation. The phone sessions will require a ½ hour of your time each.

Thank you for your interest and time, and for considering your potential participation in my research study. I would love to set up a 30-minute phone interview at your convenience, to hear more about your experience and discuss the possibility of your involvement.

When is a good time to connect during the week or weekend?

With gratitude,

Azita Nahai

1046 Maybrook Drive

Beverly Hills, CA 90210

310-963-6975

azitanahai28@yahoo.com

## APPENDIX F

## EXCLUSION/THANK YOU LETTER

Dear ____Name of Potential Participant_____,

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your interest and time, and for considering your participation in my research study at Fielding Graduate University.

I am beyond amazed at the number of fellow practitioners who have shown up to support this study. It is clear validation by your responsive interest and the interest of so many others that this ancient somatic practice of Kundalini Yoga truly does offer more to our lives, our growth, our healing and our transformation than we could have ever imagined before stepping into it.

I wish I could include everyone who has shown interest and been positively affected by this yoga practice. At this time all study participants have been selected and my study sample plate is full. This current study of mine is only the beginning of the dedicated work and research I will continue to do, and would appreciate your participation in my future research endeavors should you be interested.

Until then, thank you again.

With gratitude,

Azita Nahai

1046 Maybrook Drive

Beverly Hills, CA 90210

310-963-6975

azitanahai28@yahoo.com