



shedding the LAYERS

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When I told my friends I was attending an ecstatic dance retreat in Bali the general response was a slightly raised eyebrow and an uncertain 'err, ok.' I wasn't surprised. Put the words 'ecstatic' and 'dance' together and images of half naked hippies swooning trance-like in the mountains spring to mind. That said, the retreat promised to combine Kundalini yoga with dance classes and meditation and I for one was very curious to find out what was in store.

DAY ONE

I arrive in Bali and am whisked straight to the sleepy – yet increasingly trendy – district of Canggu. We pull into Desa Seni Village Resort and it's immediately apparent that I've arrived somewhere special. Set in the midst of lush rice fields, the peaceful vibe that emanates from this tranquil property is palpable.

Translating to 'art village', Desa Seni has gone to great lengths to re-create an authentic Indonesian neighbourhood and as I walk down stone paths and across traditional wooden foot bridges, my eyes drink in the sight of verdant gardens and organic vegetable plots. True to its name, tasteful art sculptures are also scattered around the resort's lawns.

Re-defining quaint with a capital Q, the refurbished antique Indonesian cottages that comprise its accommodations ooze rustic character. Decorated with authentic ethnic décor, each handcrafted dwelling has a unique history attached to it (mine originally belonged to famed Indonesian author, Pramoedya Ananta Toer), and seamlessly blends into the surrounding rural landscape.

I wander up to the open-air yoga pavilion where other retreat-goers are gathering. There is about a dozen of us, all of which are women, most of which are expats living in Bali, many of which already know each other. Initially I feel a little intimidated by their established familiarity but everyone seems super friendly.

Beginning with a circle of introduction, our teachers – Ellen Watson and Daphna Dor – tell us that we're going to work our way up the body and its chakras (energy centres), using yoga and dance as tools to cultivate, express and balance our energies. We're asked to introduce ourselves to the group and state a personal intention for the week ahead.

“Kundalini Yoga is simply uncoiling yourself to find your potential and your vitality and to reach your virtues. There is nothing outside. Everything is in you. You are the storehouse of your totality.”

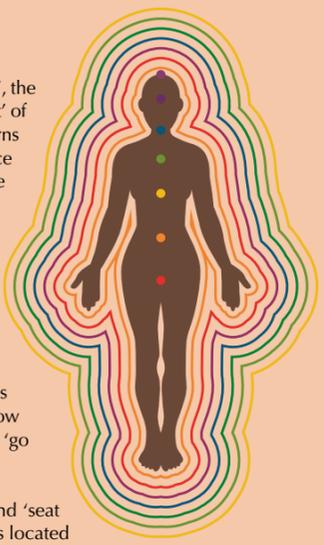
~ YOGI BHAJAN

The honesty of the verbal affirmations makes it quickly apparent that everyone has come to the retreat with an open mind and heart; healing, and playfulness are the top priorities and I have no doubt, the teachings are going to offer us both.

We move onto our yoga mats and start our first Kundalini session by ‘tuning in’ using the traditional ‘Adi Mantra’. Chanting plays an important role in Kundalini and it’s believed that mantras not only liberate the mind of thoughts, but produce vibrations that allow one to tap into higher spiritual frequencies. This initial mantra (which roughly translates to ‘I call upon creative consciousness and divine wisdom’), can be likened to the traditional yoga ‘om’.

We sit cross-legged and circle the spine then begin a series of spinal flexes and leg lifts. Each of the exercises incorporates Kundalini’s most widely used mantra ‘sat nam’ which translates to ‘true identity’; its repetition is said to invoke grace and ultimately awaken a person’s true self. Daphna talks us through saying, “before allowing our spirit to launch into its boundlessness, we must first feel connected to the earth.”

After the Kundalini class winds down, Ellen gets us on our feet and quickly has us frolicking around the room. Talking us through the body parts from the base up, she informs us that one-quarter of the bones in the human body are in the feet (not to mention the 33 joints that hold them together) and encourages us to activate them all. Reminding us of the importance of breath, she also



1 the chakras
Referred to by some as ‘the anchor of the spirit’, the root chakra (‘*muladhara*’) is said to be the ‘seat’ of Kundalini and is the grounding force that governs feelings of emotional security, self-acceptance and centeredness. Located at the base of the spine and illustrated by the colour red, it is the foundation upon which every other energy centre relies for stability.

2 Symbolised by the colour orange, the second chakra (‘*svadhisthana*’) is situated in the abdominal/pelvic region and is where stored emotions, creativity and sexual energy lay. Aligned with the element of water, it relates to fluidity and the ability to express and flow with emotions freely – hence the expression ‘go with the flow.’

3 Widely known as the body’s power centre and ‘seat of emotions’, the third chakra (‘*manipurna*’) is located between the solar plexus and naval. This dynamic energy centre (expressed as the colour yellow) is said to inspire vitality, drive transformation and help us overcome inertia. When balanced it leads to a sense of self-empowerment and confidence.

4 Located in the heart and reflected in the colour green, the fourth chakra (‘*anahata*’) is regarded as the ‘seat of the soul’ and a centre for love, compassion, acceptance (of self and others) and emotional expression. It guides us in relationships and as Daphna says, “takes us from ‘me’ to ‘we’.”

5 Represented by the colour blue, the fifth chakra (‘*visuddha*’) is located in the throat and not surprisingly, relates to communication and truthful expression. When functioning optimally, the throat chakra is said to help us convey our inner selves to the outside world with honesty and conviction.

6 Located between the eyebrows, the sixth chakra (‘*ajna*’) is the centre of ‘cosmic consciousness’ in which intuitive wisdom resides. Represented by the colour indigo and known as the ‘third eye’, it effects our ability to perceive situations and life events clearly. Stimulating it is said to propel spiritual growth, resulting in elevated awareness of the ‘higher self’.

7 Communicated through the colour violet, the crown chakra (‘*sahasrara*’) is known as the centre of divine wisdom and spiritual enlightenment. An open crown chakra is said to link the individual to the universal, resulting in heightened spiritual awareness and a sense of ‘all-knowingness’.

8 According to traditional yoga philosophy, the body has seven chakras, however Kundalini yoga refers to the body’s ‘aura’ (the electro-magnetic field surrounding the physical body) as an eighth one. Expressed as the colour white, this field of energy unites the combined vibrations (and colours) of the seven chakras. Its size, colour and strength fluctuate constantly, however it’s believed by strengthening it, we can increase our overall radiance or ‘divine shine’.



ALPIA CHAKRAS © ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/JAMES ARRINGTON



THIS PAGE: (Left) Exploring the body through spontaneous movement; (Right) Me letting my body do the talking on the dance floor. OPPOSITE PAGE: A root chakra Kundalini session. OPENING PAGES: Ellen Watson leading the class in ecstatic dance.

encourages us to express ourselves not just through movement, but through sound, and before long loud sighs and tribal-style catcalls can be heard reverberating around the room.

Moving upward to the knees, hips, chest and arms, Ellen instructs us to tap into the element of air and before long I’m pirouetting and shimmying around the room. Encouraging us to explore the space and our movements, she tells us to dance backwards, sideways and in circles, all to the sound of music ranging from reggae, to traditional Cherokee folk ballads, to techno trance.

By this time the sun has set and in the semi-darkness there is a sense of false invisibility that veils all self-consciousness. Ellen turns up the volume and the sound of ethnic beats drown out the murmurings of my mind. All inhibitions are lost and as I dance freely through the space I discover my hips have a mind all of their own. There is something incredibly primal about the whole experience and as the evening draws to a close I feel my inner child clapping her hands in glee.

DAY TWO
The morning
The day starts with an early rise. Class begins at 7.15am, which means I wander into the open-air studio at approximately 7.14. As a

continuation of the previous day, the focus of the morning’s dance class is the root chakra and we start on the floor and make our way up, rather like babies first learning to crawl before walking.

At one point during the class Ellen invites us all to stand on one side of the room and asks for someone to direct us in the next stage of movement. Due to the nature of my profession, I am used to leadership and my instant and natural inclination is to step forward and take

The spirit in motion heals, expands, circles in and out of the body, moving through the layers of consciousness from inertia to ecstasy. Open to the spirit, and you will be transformed.

~ GABRIELLE ROTH

control of the situation. I’ve been an extrovert since childhood and am not daunted about stepping out and looking silly. As a direct result I purposefully hold myself back until someone else takes the lead. This surprisingly challenging act allows me to relinquish my usual leadership responsibilities (and control freak tendencies) and become a passive follower. A great exercise in impulse control.

Daphna takes over and the Kundalini

class shifts from the root to the sacral chakra. We begin a series of spinal grinds (circles) and flexes, ‘frogs’ (leg squats) and ‘crow poses’ (modified leg squats) during which Daphna explains, “our goal here is to cultivate a sense of creativity, expansiveness and security from within so that we feel less need to reach outside ourselves for happiness.” The poses aren’t easy and by ‘savasana’ (corpse pose) I feel truly physically fatigued and a little grumpy.

Luckily most of the dance class is spent horizontal. A clearer description would be ‘writhing around on the floor getting in contact with the energy in our lower back, sacrum, pelvis and hips’. Although this may sound rather saucy, it basically means slithering around on the ground like a snake for an hour, occasionally rising to shimmy our hips. Ellen likens the body to a musical instrument that we’re simply tuning up through movement. I love this description and imagine mine as a schreechy violin being tweaked by a master musician.

The afternoon
I struggle quite a bit during the afternoon – firstly because of physical fatigue, then because my niggling thoughts are distracting me from being completely in the moment. My body feels heavy – like swimming in the



THIS PAGE: (Left) Daphna Dor in action; and (Right) chest-opening stretches. OPPOSITE PAGE: (Left) Stimulating the third eye in a Kundalini class; and (Right) opening the heart in camel pose.

ocean with clothes on – and I find myself drifting in and out of scattered thought before remembering something a yoga teacher had mentioned during a class a few days before. She said, “Lose your mind and find your senses.” Easier said than done, but I do find that by ignoring my brain chatter and concentrating on sensations such as the sound of the music, the sight of the gorgeous gardens surrounding me, the breath pouring in and out of my body, and the feeling of my feet brushing against the wood floor, bring me into the moment.

DAY THREE
The Morning

An undercurrent of self-acceptance pervades the retreat, and as I rise at 6.30am, for the second day’s activities, I come to accept I’m not a morning person.

Today’s focus is the third chakra and as someone who has a long history of digestive health problems (a sign of third chakra imbalance) I’m particularly interested in strengthening this zone.

Ellen begins the class by reminding us that dance is simply moving meditation, and that by expressing ourselves through our bodies, we can leave our minds at the door. “If the mind comes knocking, greet it, but don’t invite it in for tea,” says Ellen. Unfortunately my mind is like a rude neigh-

bour who pops in uninvited and turns on the kettle before asking.

The music starts and we reel out across the room. First we dance solo, then form a line at the back of the room and purposefully stomp across the space together with arms swinging. The atmosphere is that of a small army claiming their stake on a piece of land that is rightfully theirs.

Ellen passes out musical instruments and we begin to jig along to the sounds of

“Kundalini yoga is the kind that makes your heart sing.”

~DAPHNA DOR

our own freeform percussion. The weather outside is stormy, humid and oppressive and although we’re all enthusiastic, the energy levels feel lower today. The class winds down and Daphna takes over.

The Kundalini class revolves around opening and strengthening the navel zone. In other words, that dreaded place that every gym trainer, Pilates instructor and yoga teacher constantly refers to – the core. This means along with the usual seated twisting and standing postures, we have to partake in tummy crunches, ab strengtheners and leg lifts. My stomach is without doubt my weakest area and I find myself unhappily

grimacing and groaning.

Obviously this reaction is not uncommon and Daphna talks us through the sequence, reminding us to smile through our pain and focus on the mantra (*sat nam*) and breath, rather than thoughts. I find this helps a lot and as I concentrate on the intake and exhalation of breath, my mind shifts into a place of quiet as pure physical determination takes over.

When we finish the class I am feeling tired and a little deflated. My hamstrings and thighs are aching from all the dancing and stretching, and my shoulders feel tight from overstimulation. To remedy this I head straight to the spa and indulge in a deep tissue massage. My masseuse leaves no muscle unturned and I leave nearly two hours later feeling like a new woman.

The Afternoon

The second half of the day is devoted entirely to Kundalini with the focus of opening the fourth chakra. This entails lots of chest opening movements – side twists, cobra stretches and backbends.

The general vibe is mellow and although the movements are testing at times, the teachings themselves are very gentle and nurturing. “When the heart is open we see the divinity in all beings around us,” says Daphna.

We finish the class with a healing circle, in which we chant a soothing mantra. People who want to receive healing move to the centre and in the last five minutes I find myself gravitating into the middle of the circle to bathe in some of the beautiful energy that’s being created – a wonderful way to finish the day.

DAY FOUR
The Morning

The day begins with a three-hour dance class devoted to the fourth and fifth chakras. Since the fifth chakra is located in the throat, Ellen encourages us to express ourselves through sound – or what she terms ‘audible breath’ – as well as movement. To help us with this she’s chosen well-known songs so we can sing along to as we dance.

I belt out my own version of ‘Pretty Woman’ while strutting around the room. I can’t help but laugh out loud and this, I believe, is the point. The ambiance is very lighthearted and playful and as I fling my body parts around the dance floor, feel a sense of liberation and energy that was previously missing.

This brings into play another exercise in self-discipline – to hold back a bit and pace myself rather than over-exerting my energies and running out of steam too early (the story of The Tortoise and the Hare comes to mind).

I am the kind of person who throws herself into things 100%, and have been (unsuccessfully) trying to master the art of finding the middle ground for years. Although the dance class is a simple physical example of my ongoing energy management dilemma, it represents a significant test for me – one that forces me to reassess my hare ways.

Healing Session

After some lunch and a swim in the resort’s saltwater pool I head to a healing session. I’ve booked in for some past life regression therapy and am a tad nervous. I’ve always been curious about the concept of past lives and although I have no idea what the session will uncover, feel compelled to try it out.

Generally speaking, past life regression is a hypnotherapy method that guides the receiver into a state of meditation with the goal of retrieving memories from the unconscious mind. Acting as a release of negative patterns and fear-based thinking, it claims to result in a greater clarity of life’s purpose.

My facilitator, Sam, begins by asking me questions about my current state of mind and emotions. I run through a list of relevant emotional speed bumps and she goes on to ask me what I want to get out of the session. My main motivation is simple curiosity – I’ve never been hypnotised and want to see if anything profound actually

comes of the experience; but secondly, to better understand my emotional habits and see if they’re rooted in a past life event.

I lie down and Sam starts talking me into hypnosis. As she described in advance, I can feel my body quickly sinking into a deep state of meditation and as she guides me through a visualisation exercise, I feel a sense of depth to the table, as though I am sinking into water. From here she guides me back in time and at this point my conscious mind takes a rest.

I won’t go into detail of what entailed over the next hour, but I will say I tapped into two past lives. Sam asked me specific questions and although I could hear my own voice answering with clarity and certainty, I have no idea where the answers were coming from. It was like being inside and outside myself at the same time. Even more interesting were the stories coming out of my mouth – all of which held enormous relevance for my current emotional patterns.

The Afternoon

The afternoon’s session focuses on the fifth and sixth chakras with the goal of facilitating more truthful communication and a better sense of intuition and trust.

We start with the throat and along with chanting, partake in some shoulder shrugs, neck rolls and ‘camel’ (backbend) poses.



THIS PAGE: (Top) Toer cottage; (Middle) dancing with scarves; and (Bottom) the resort's beautiful salt water pool. OPPOSITE PAGE: (Left) Follow the leader! A class member directs the movement; and (Right) the group on the final day.

The mantras pull me through the motions and my mind feels very clear. "If we say or express positive and truthful things we create light and truth around us," says Daphna as we bend and stretch.

Moving up to the third eye, we begin a series of kneeling, bowing and standing forward-bend exercises. The goal we're told, is to free ourselves from the capriciousness of the mind by focusing within, instead of outside ourselves.

Ellen takes over and shifts the focus back to the fifth chakra. We spend the rest of the afternoon singing our way through various melodies but I'm still slightly spun-out from my earlier healing session and spend the last hour of the class lying peacefully on the floor.

DAY FIVE

The Morning

It is a sunny day and I head to morning class feeling energised and focused. Starting with a dance class geared towards stimulating the sixth and seventh chakras, we begin with freeform movement as Ellen talks to us about the art of twirling. As she points out, the act of spinning as a form of meditation can be traced back to the traditional Sufi Dervishes who whirled repetitively to enter a trance-like state, and ultimately, to reach heightened spiritual consciousness.

I've never practiced repetitive twirling and even after a short exercise of rolling in circles on the floor, feel a little dizzy and nauseous. Regardless I get to my feet and as instructed, twist my right arm so my palm is in the direction of my face (like a pretend mirror) and start spinning.

At first I feel unbalanced and as I see the surroundings swirl by me, a little sick. I continue and find my concentration intensifying and my speed accelerating. My mind goes completely empty as I focus 100% on my hand and although I can still

see flashes of people and colour whizzing by, feel extremely centered.

Although my legs are the limbs propelling me around, I feel detached from them. The sensation grows and I totally lose track of how many times I've spun around. I slowly unfurl to a complete stop before starting the same exercise in the opposite direction.

My feet and legs feel clumsy on this side, yet after a while I pick up speed and feel intensely focussed before suddenly feeling the need to snap out of it. At this point I lose my balance and go flying across the room. I'm completely disoriented and even though one of the other dancers catches me (to prevent me from going headfirst into a nearby garden), I feel as though the room has spun on its axis and everything is sideways.

Even after my balance returns my sense

of direction is somewhat off kilter and I feel elated to the point of giddy. One thing's certain – the fatigue and lethargy from earlier in the week has lifted and my mind has finally gone quiet.

The Afternoon

In the afternoon Daphna guides us through a dynamic

range of exercises to stimulate the crown chakra or as she says, "connect and surrender to our higher power." This entails an extended session of Kundalini's most potent exercise: 'sat kriya'. Executed by chanting 'sat nam' while sitting on the heels with arms stretched overhead, fingers interlaced and pointing up, this pose is said to stimulate and balance the energies of all seven chakras at once. The idea is to tense and relax the belly with each chant (and breath) while focusing on the third eye. "Think your truth, speak your truth, be your truth!" encourages Daphna as we chant.

The session winds down and we all wander down to the nearby beach where a drummer and bonfire await. Ellen instigates a dance session and musical instruments are

ecstatic dance

Ecstatic dance is a freeform style of moving meditation that shifts consciousness beyond the mind, into the body. It facilitates healing and transformation by restoring the body's 'prana' (energy) flow which in turn, connects the dancer to their essence or 'higher consciousness'. Based on the tenets of shamanism, the goal is to surrender to the rhythms and let the body's wisdom guide the dancer's movements.

kundalini yoga

Dubbed the 'yoga of awareness', the goal of Kundalini yoga is to awaken dormant energy at the base of the spine (*Kundalini*) so that one's 'true self' (infinite potential) can be revealed. This is achieved through a unique sequence of postures (*asanas*), breath-work (*pranayama*), hand and finger gestures (*mudras*), body locks (*bhandas*), chanting and song (*mantras*) and meditation which are practiced in sets known as '*kriyas*'. Kundalini claims to stimulate and balance the muscular glandular, digestive and circulatory systems as well as opening and aligning the chakras (energy centres).

passed around as the moon rises overhead. I am super tired and the smell of the salty air and bongo rhythms lull me into a state of peaceful calm. I watch passively as the others dance and soak up the good vibes.

DAY SIX

On our final morning we begin with a healing circle then move into a tapping exercise. Borrowing from a Qigong method, Ellen instructs us to tap along the meridian channels – from the feet right up to the wrists – to restore the body's yin/yang balance. The secret, Ellen says, is to send love and healing to the area that you're tapping. We tap away and by the time we're finished I definitely feel the energy buzzing.

We then move into our final Kundalini class. Along with lots of arm flapping exercises we do an extended session of 'eagle pose'. This posture entails sitting cross-legged and holding arms up at a 60-degree angle while practicing 'breath of fire' (rapid, rhythmic, forceful breath). We do this for what feels like a lifetime and by the time Daphna tells us to release

I feel like my arms are going to drop off.

We complete the retreat with a final dance-off. Ellen turns up the music and a euphoric atmosphere sweeps over the room as we all bounce around smiling and laughing. The group's bond is intense yet buoyant and the atmosphere is laced with the bittersweet flavour that accompanies farewells.

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

I finish the week feeling light, clear-headed and extremely centered. My energy levels have lifted considerably and the first few days of physical sluggishness feel like a distant memory. Testimony to the counter-intuitive principle, 'expend energy and you'll feel more energetic', the week's exertions have kicked my sedentary butt.

More significantly though is a feeling of grounded 'connectedness'. A true sense of peace has washed over the persistent thoughts that were lurking in the shadows of my mind earlier in the week and although I know reality will soon rear its head, for now I am happy to bask in the pleasant glow of a week's worth of healing.

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