



Shakta Kaur

Long-Distance Runner's Path to Kundalini Yoga

By Sharon Steffensen

It was running that brought kundalini yoga teacher Shakta Kaur (aka Susan Kezios) to yoga. She had been running for 26 years, six days a week, a minimum of four miles a day, with 12-to 17-mile runs on weekends. In 1998, when her running coach, Bill Leach, the men's track and field coach at DePaul University, told her she really needed to learn to meditate, Shakta told him she didn't have time, that her life was too stressful and that running was her meditation. But in one of her private sessions with him, he finally insisted. He had been meditating for 30 years--and he was her coach, after all--so she decided to follow his advice. He taught her an eyes-open style of meditation.

At one of their sessions, Bill gave her Deepak Chopra's *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*. After reading it, Shakta was inspired to go to Chopra's center, then located in La Jolla, California, where she took classes and learned Primordial Sound Meditation, an offshoot of TM (Transcendental Meditation), a technique she found easier to practice than the eyes-open style.

When she returned to Chicago, Shakta began attending as many personal growth workshops as she could fit into her schedule. Every weekend, it seemed, she was investing time in her personal growth and development, which had become her top priority. She had heard about a workshop being offered at Transitions Learning Center called "Meditation as Medicine" with Dharma Singh Khalsa, MD, but she decided to skip that one; she didn't want to spend another beautiful weekend indoors. However, while at a downtown Borders bookstore (where she was cashing in on a coupon for a free latte), as life would have it, all the seats were taken, so she browsed through the bookshelves. Shakta says that Dharma Singh Khalsa's book (*Meditation as Medicine*) literally fell off the shelf and almost hit her on the head.



She bought the book and read half of it before the workshop, which she ended up attending after all. The course included meditation and mantras. Shakta bought an audiocassette consisting of a kundalini yoga kriya (a prescribed set of yoga exercises) called "Basic Spinal Energy Series" with a meditation. She practiced the basic series followed by a meditation each morning and soon felt the need to practice a kundalini meditation each evening, too. She chose a different evening meditation every 40 days or so. She continued her morning practice for the next six months and then went to Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, for a weekend yoga and meditation course with Dr. Dharma. She returned home and changed her practice somewhat, choosing a

different morning kriya; however, the cranial sacral therapist she had been seeing could tell right away that she had stopped doing the basic spinal energy routine that had kept her spine loose, so she went back to it.

Finally, Shakta had found what she was looking for. Her running coach had told her, "Adult runners are really looking for something else. They are either running to something or from something. They think they are trying to increase their speed or develop their core strength, but they are really looking for something else." How right he was!



Shakta found that on the mornings when she only had time to run or do her yoga, she chose her yoga. That said a lot about the direction in which her life was headed! She cut way back on running (to two miles three times a week), got up earlier and always practiced a kriya along with a meditation. In the evening she came home and did another 11 to 31 minutes of meditation. Dr. Dharma introduced Shakta to Shiva Singh Khalsa and Shabad Kaur Khalsa, co-directors of Spirit Rising Yoga in Chicago. Shakta took her first kundalini yoga teacher training course from them--not with the intention to teach, but to deepen her practice. While she was in teacher training, she found herself teaching kundalini yoga and meditations to her bank loan officer and other business associates. One month after graduating from teacher training, Shakta rented space to teach in a downtown Chicago studio. A year later she moved to the Fine Arts Building on south Michigan Avenue and opened Kundalini Yoga in the Loop (KYL), a thriving, downtown yoga studio.

When Shakta's partner, Hari Dev Singh, heard her chanting one particular mantra in the mornings, he wanted to be a part of it. They practiced together, and eventually Hari Dev decided he wanted to take kundalini teacher training. Hari Dev and Shakta went to Espanola, New Mexico, to take "The Master's Touch" course from the 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) founded by Yogi Bhanjan. Yogi Bhanjan introduced the technology of kundalini yoga to the U.S. in 1969. (Kundalini yoga as taught by Yogi Bhanjan consists of asanas, pranayama, mudra (sacred hand gestures), chanting and meditation in a specific sequence to clear the energy channels and prepare the body and mind for transformation.) So Shakta went with Hari Dev and took kundalini yoga teacher training a second time!

Besides her regular schedule of classes at Kundalini Yoga in the Loop, Shakta offers kundalini yoga and meditation workshops all over Chicagoland and is certified to teach a walking meditation course called "Breathwalk" which derives from the kundalini tradition. She was a presenter at the Midwest Yoga Conference June 3-5 in Bloomingdale, Illinois, where she led three classes. This fall Shakta, along with a team of internationally known kundalini yogis, all trained by the late Yogi Bhanjan, will sponsor KYL's first kundalini yoga teacher training; the classes will be held one weekend a month over eight months at Kundalini Yoga in the Loop. Shakta feels blessed to be able to offer her hand to others on their own path of self-discovery. She also serves on the Board of Directors of Yoga Alliance (YA). Through YA, she hopes she can help other yoga teachers run prosperous yoga studios by applying time-tested business techniques with which she is intimately familiar.



For 20 years, Shakta has worked in franchising. She is president of Women in

Franchising, a company she started in 1988 after owning a franchise herself--VR Business Brokers--which listed and sold businesses and franchises. She found that franchise corporations wanted to market to women, but she was concerned that women would sign bad contracts with these franchise companies. Franchise contracts, she points out, are often misleading and always one-sided, and the typical franchise purchaser often has no business experience. As a result, many, many people have lost their life savings. Her work expanded to include minorities; then, after the experience of testifying before Congressional committees in the early 1990s, Shakta discovered that it wasn't only women and minorities who were experiencing franchise-related difficulties, and she found herself in the role of advocate for all franchise owners.

She founded the American Franchisee Association in 1993 and traveled extensively to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress for legislation to level the playing field and prevent corporations from devaluing the investments of their franchise owners. Owing to Shakta's advocacy work, the Small Business Franchise Act was introduced twice in Congress with strong bipartisan support. Although she is good at debating with lawyers and testifying before congressional committees, it is highly stressful work...hence, her journey of self-discovery that led to kundalini yoga and meditation.

Now Shakta's franchise work is limited mostly to consulting for individual franchise owners and franchisee associations. Hari Dev works with her both in the franchising office and at the yoga studio. They were married recently in their yoga studio and love spending all their time together. Every morning Hari Dev thanks God for all his blessings: for life (he beat cancer last year), his "beautiful wife" and their little condo. Shakta and Hari Dev are advocates of ayurveda, an ancient Indian holistic medical system, and the ayurvedic cleansing technique panchakarma, which can be spread out over several days or weeks and incorporates vigorous massage with oils, scrubs and special diet. Last February they led a tour to India for 10 people.

Shakta believes that part of her attraction to kundalini yoga and meditation is the mantras, which are chanted. She had been an undergraduate piano major, minoring in koto (a Japanese stringed instrument). For a time she taught music in the public school system, where she acquired teaching experience. Even more important to Shakta than being a teacher is being a good student--and a good listener. Indeed, she listened to her running coach, and as a result took up meditation and read Deepak Chopra's book. Although she had decided against attending Dr. Dharma's workshop, when his book practically hit her in the head, she "listened." Shakta notes that Yogi Bhanjan used to say that you cannot become a master until you have mastered becoming a student. Shakta has.

Kundalini Yoga in the Loop (KYL) offers kundalini yoga/meditation and Breathwalk (walking meditation) classes each week in the Fine Arts Building, 410 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 514, in downtown Chicago. For more information on classes, the upcoming kundalini yoga teacher training course and Breathwalk instructor training, call 312.922.4699 or E-mail info@shaktakaur.com. Also visit the Web site www.shaktakaur.com.