

# KRIYA YOGA

## *A time-tested and profound means of awakening insight*

by Swami Nishchalananda

Kriya yoga is a sophisticated and practical method of harmonising and synchronising the natural energies of our being to allow the physical, emotional, etheric and mental energies to be brought into alignment. It works directly on the *chakras* (energy centres) so that we start to become more aware of the energies that they represent. In this way, we become more fluid and open, enabling us to catalyse energy. The mind begins to resonate like a tuning fork and we open up to insight; this brings about enormous changes in our understanding, perception and behaviour.

Each of us, as an embodied being, has the possibility of accessing the enormous potential that is the very basis of our existence. In yoga, this is known as the *kundalini* (transformative primal energy). Kriya yoga opens us up to this potential. Moreover, since each of us is a reflection of the totality, kriya yoga allows us to consciously commune with what we are on a fundamental level.

### ***Finding joy***

Most people are, more or less, dissatisfied. Even those who are reaping the benefits of modern science and technology – surrounded by comfort and facilities which surpass even those of kings and queens of the past – are discontented. One of the main reasons is that we have subscribed to and accept unquestioningly the materialistic paradigm which for many is the present-day religion. In so doing, we have neglected the most fundamental aspect of life: realisation of our essential roots. By living more consciously in tune with who and what we are in essence, we rediscover meaning and purpose in our life. Then every act, thought and feeling is imbued with joy.

Kriya yoga is a systematic, time-tested and profound means to open our eyes to the wonder of existence, and especially the wonder of *our own* existence. When we feel awe, unhappiness and frustration fade away like mist before the rising sun. The daily ups and downs of life will of course remain, but our capacity to ride these transient waves is enhanced. Instead of totally identifying with these waves, we identify more and more with the ocean of being.

### ***Definitions***

The Sanskrit word *kriya* means ‘to move’. Kriya yoga is so called for two reasons:

- the body is moved into different positions according to the fixed sequence of the practices

- attention is moved along prescribed energy pathways within the body, thereby awakening subtle energies.

The word *kriya* also means ‘practical’. Therefore, kriya yoga is less concerned with theoretical and philosophical speculation and more with the practical means of bringing about direct and transformative experience and insight. Regular practice helps whittle away blockages, allowing finer qualities – such as clarity, confidence, compassion and joy – to manifest through our personality.

Moreover, the word *kriya* is the name given to each individual practice of kriya yoga.

### ***The spinal chakras<sup>1</sup>***

The Sanskrit word *chakra* means ‘wheel, circle, vortex’. These are centres which catalyse specific energy patterns in each individual. Taken together, the chakras embrace the entire spectrum of human experience. The awaken-ing of the higher chakras<sup>2</sup>, especially the agya chakra, gives us access to insight into deeper levels of our being.

In yoga, the chakras are widely symbolised by lotuses of differing numbers of petals and colours. In western mysticism, they are known as psychic centres or energy centres.

There are six major chakras, which from top to bottom, are as follows:

<b>Sanskrit</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Key quality</b>
<i>Agya</i>	third eye or insight centre	centre of the head	insight and comprehension
<i>Vishuddhi</i>	purification centre	throat	purification and communication
<i>Anahata</i>	heart centre	heart	love and compassion
<i>Manipura</i>	navel centre	navel	reactive emotions/ ambition/ drive
<i>Swadhishtana</i>	pelvic centre	pelvis	sexual/ sensual desire/ creativity
<i>Mooladhara</i>	root centre	perineum (men) or cervix (women)	physicality and instincts

They are known as the ‘spinal chakras’ since, on a physical level, each chakra is symbolically located along the spine. These physical locations are associated with the sites of specific endocrinal glands, nerve plexuses and physical organs, as well as with specific emotional responses and states of mind.

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<sup>1</sup>. More detailed information on the chakras is given in the author’s book *The Edge of Infinity* and in a booklet entitled *Chakras – Keys to a quantum leap in human evolution*, both of which are available from the ashram.

<sup>2</sup>. I don’t like using the term ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ because, ultimately, I don’t think anything is higher or lower. When speaking of ‘high’ and ‘low’ in relation to the chakras, there is no judgmental connotation intended. In yogic circles, one is often under the impression that the quicker the lower chakras are discarded, the better! There is nothing ‘wrong’ with the so-called lower chakras as such. They are an essential part of our lives and we do not need to reject them; rather they should be refined by awakening the higher chakras.

These physical locations are known as trigger points since they can be used as focal points for concentration, thereby helping to access deeper levels of each chakra.

The practices of kriya yoga work directly on these trigger points through direct physical stimulation, use of the breath, mantras and visualisation. They give us a tangible means of focusing our attention as an aid in awakening the energies represented by the chakras.

### ***Each of us is embodied energy represented by the chakras***

The paradigm of the chakras has come to us from tantra<sup>3</sup> and is based on a deep understanding of energy as the basis of our embodiment. Even our physical body is organised and structured energy. The chakras represent different levels of energy that comprise the spectrum of our being. Though the paradigm of the chakras seems to belong to esoteric teachings, they are experienced by all of us. In fact, what the chakras represent is functioning right now and functions throughout our life. For example, if you feel the sensation of physicality, it is the mooladhara; if you feel sexual energy, then it is the swadhishtana that is functioning; anger or drive, it is the manipura that is active; if you feel love or compassion, it is the anahata; if you awaken understanding in any way, whether intellectual or intuitive, then it is the agya chakra. It is not a question of belief, but of our own undeniable experience. The paradigm of the chakras is a way of describing these energies and how they express themselves in our day-to-day lives.

Our lives are driven by energy. Energy can go into work, eating and digesting food, sport, talking, into anything that comprises the activities of our life. Our level of vital energy is continually changing. One day, we may feel exuberant energy whilst, on another, we may feel a bit flat and unmotivated to do even the simplest task. This energy can go into any of the shades of emotion which add colour to our self-expression. All this is a reflection of the chakras.

Electricity is potential energy waiting to be tapped: it can be directed into a bulb to give us light, into a heater to warm us, or into an electric drill to bore a hole in a steel plate. The electricity is the same in all these cases, but it produces a different effect depending on the appliance through which it passes. Similarly, the chakras are the gates which allow vital energy to express itself in different ways according to our inner states and attitudes and their dynamic relationship with moment-to-moment external situations. They distribute vital energy to the whole body and mind via energy circuits, functioning efficiently or inefficiently, appropriately or inappropriately, depending on how much they are blocked or free flowing.

Generally, if we are materialistic in outlook we tend to function and live our lives according to the energies of the so-called lower chakras – the mooladhara, swadhishtana and manipura. There is nothing wrong with this as such, only that it prevents us fully experiencing the energies and qualities of the higher chakras and thereby realising our fullest potential. The purpose of kriya yoga is to activate all the chakras, especially the higher ones, so that we start to function harmoniously along their whole spectrum.

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<sup>3</sup>. Tantra: literally, 'to stretch and liberate'; an ancient transformative system, closely allied to yoga, which expands the mind and liberates potential energy to bring spiritual awakening.

The higher chakras start to function as a natural part of our embodiment as blockages begin to be removed from our personality. These blockages may be physical, emotional, or mental. The chakras of each of us are all more or less blocked since our personality is attached to concepts and dogmas and bound by traumas, fears, etc. Kriya yoga – and indeed any form of yoga – helps us to remove these impediments and also to activate the kundalini.

### ***The kundalini***

The *kundalini* is the transformative primal energy that resides in all of us, although it is mostly unrealised. When this primal energy starts to flow freely through all the spinal chakras, it is defined as the ascent of the kundalini.

The kundalini is figuratively based in the mooladhara chakra: that is, in our physical body below the base of the spine. This indicates, as humans, that we totally identify with our body and personality. Therefore we are severely limited in our understanding. The kundalini is said to be sleeping or dormant, which means that our innate potential is often unknown and unexpressed. As such, we are awake to the world but asleep to our essential nature. We tend to be very ego-centred and our spiritual understanding is very rudimentary or even nonexistent.

Through the practice of kriya yoga, the kundalini starts to awaken, opening our eyes to hidden dimensions of our being and our greater potential. Our understanding expands and we go beyond present conceptions of ourselves. We start to be released from the obsessive entanglements and attachments of the mooladhara, swadhishtana and manipura chakras – that is, physicality, sexuality and self-centred ambition. This doesn't mean that these chakras cease to function, but rather that we start to open up to the potential of the higher chakras.

Our vital energies begin to move more in the higher chakras. The kundalini energy brings the potential at these chakras to fruition. We become aware of life's possibilities, which were previously unknown or based merely on hearsay and hazy concepts. Our eyes are opened to that which transcends our limited personality, and we are obliged to reassess our total identification with our physical nature and personality. When the kundalini stirs in an individual, it brings enormous changes in the body-mind: the nervous system, brain and mind are filled with energy, creativity and inspiration.<sup>4</sup> Our whole system is 'tuned' to higher vibrations. In a sense, our being becomes a sacred place, the ultimate place of pilgrimage.<sup>5</sup> There is no need to go anywhere else for the secrets of the universe lie within our own being.

The awakening of the kundalini symbolises the fact that each of us has the potentiality to transcend our current limitations. The kundalini is said to be the devourer of time for when it awakens it leads to

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<sup>4</sup> If the kundalini awakens in an unprepared body-mind, however, it can cause mayhem. Kriya and hatha yoga give the necessary preparation so that the kundalini awakens in a balanced way.

<sup>5</sup> The yogic and tantric texts have always emphasised that the real place of pilgrimage is not in the outside world but within. However, outer pilgrimages are very useful to the extent that they help to bring inspiration, mental lucidity and inner peace.

realisation of the timeless. It is associated with higher levels of understanding, intelligence, harmony and peace. The purpose of kriya yoga is to awaken the kundalini.

### ***The bindu and the sahasrara***

When the kundalini reaches the agya chakra, we start to access insight. The mysteries of our embodiment are revealed to us.

The *bindu* and the *sahasrara* are not chakras as such but symbolise fundamental aspects of our being which are beyond the chakras (i.e., beyond the personality). They are symbolically shown as two trigger points on the surface of the head, and they play an essential role in the practice of kriya yoga.

By penetrating the bindu (the transcendental point), we are enabled to realise that our essential identity is not with the body or even the mind, but the underlying Consciousness symbolised by the sahasrara (the Source).

The word *bindu* literally means ‘point’. In a general sense, it represents any point in nature which acts as a central nucleus or creative focus: the atom, the molecule, the cell, the DNA molecule, the sperm and the ova. The bindu is the individuating principle that generates the myriad of objects in the cosmos, both animate and inanimate. It is the seed of creation and is the means by which Reality manifests the universe.

On a human level, the bindu is known as the causal body, the seed of our personality. It is the threshold between the manifest and the unmanifest, between what we are as embodied beings and the underlying background or source. Kriya yoga allows us to ‘pierce’ or penetrate the bindu. That is; we are enabled to realise what lies within, behind and beyond it: the sahasrara.

The word *sahasrara* literally means ‘thousand’, but in the context of yoga it implies ‘the infinite’. It is known as the ‘thousand-petalled lotus’, figuratively located at the crown of the head. It symbolises our greatest potential, the source of our existence and, indeed, the underlying principle behind everything in existence. In western mystical traditions it is called ‘the crown’ not only because of its symbolic location, but also because its realisation is the crowning glory of our life. It is the source of all revelation, ineffable, beyond words, concepts and descriptions. It can only be hinted at or symbolised, yet it is revealed in insight and illuminative experience.

The practice of kriya yoga raises energy through the chakras and then ‘pierces’ the bindu. In so doing, total identification with the ego-personality dissolves and That which is symbolised by the sahasrara can be realised.

### ***The two poles of our existence***

According to the philosophy of tantra, all existence is the result of the play of two cosmic principles – Shiva and Shakti.<sup>6</sup> Shiva represents underlying Intelligence or Consciousness, whilst Shakti represents the activating energy behind all phenomena.

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<sup>6</sup>. Though it must be said that, ultimately, tantra and yoga concur with advaita (non-dualism) that Reality is not dual but One.

This same concept exists in many mystical traditions worldwide. For example, *Samkhya* philosophy<sup>7</sup> posits these two cosmic principles as *Purusha* (Consciousness) and *Prakriti* (primal energy). Although couched in different symbolism and terminology, the same concept exists in Taoism, where the word *Tao* corresponds to Shiva, and *Teh*, to Shakti. The ancient Egyptians worshipped Osiris and Isis, both of whom are comparable to Shiva and Shakti respectively. In Christianity, God, the Father, corresponds to Shiva, and the Virgin Mary, the Universal Mother, to Shakti.<sup>8</sup>

You may ask, 'How does this concern me – as a personality and a little dot in existence?' Simply, it concerns each of us because the play of Shiva and Shakti applies not only to the cosmos at large but to each and every individual. It is an esoteric truth that the macrocosm is reflected into the microcosmic form of each human being. Shiva provides the individual consciousness (Sanskrit, *jivatma*), whilst Shakti provides the organism, comprising the physical, energetic and mental bodies or, in other words, the chakras.

According to tantric symbolism, Shiva resides transcendently at the sahasrara, whilst Shakti is seated in the mooladhara chakra as the body and personality. These are the two poles of our existence. In between, in the spine, are stretched the other chakras like jewels on a thread representing the different combinations of energies which comprise our embodied existence.

Shakti is regarded as feminine, whilst Shiva is considered as masculine. Metaphorically, Shakti longs to move upwards to unite with her husband Shiva to bring about the union of the primal masculine and feminine principles. This symbolises the longing or aspiration that all of us have to realise our essential nature, though many may not even be aware of it. In fact, this yearning of Shakti to unite with her spouse is symbolic of the evolutionary journey that we are all taking: the progressive movement from total identification with our earthly, embodied nature towards realisation of our fundamental essence.

When this energy starts to move upwards from the lower to the upper pole it is known as the awakening of kundalini energy; kriya yoga encourages this upward flow.

### ***Circulating energy***

One cannot work directly on Shiva, or Consciousness, as its transcendental nature makes it inaccessible to all practice. However, Shiva can be realised through Shakti (energy).

In kriya yoga practice, energy is systematically and rhythmically circulated between these two poles via two major energy channels – the *arohan* (ascending pathway) and *avarohan* (descending pathway). These channels closely correspond to the governor vessel and the conception vessel, two of the major meridians of Chinese acupuncture.

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<sup>7</sup>. An ancient Indian philosophical system, closely connected to yoga and tantra, said to have been formulated by the sage Kapila.

<sup>8</sup>. Of course, many Christians may not accept this, but from a yogic-tantric point of view this is indeed the case.



At first, the circulation of energy is only symbolic, but with regular practise there is indeed an awakening of energy which circulates through the chakras. Blockages – whether physical, energetic, emotional or mental – start to be removed. With time and practice, this process brings about the awakening of Shakti, or kundalini, culminating in the realisation of Shiva at the higher pole.

This circulation of energy in kriya yoga gives us a key to unlock Shiva's abode so that we can experience the reality of Consciousness as the basis of our individual existence. Just one glimpse – one experiential vision of Shiva – and our understanding of life, existence and what we are, completely changes. Our eyes are opened, and we realise how blind we have been.

### ***Texts, tradition and transmission***

Kriya yoga has been practised in secret for hundreds or even thousands of years and its exact origin is not known. It is a form of yoga which was developed – or perhaps we can say discovered – by sages who had tremendous insight into human nature.

Until recently, the essentials of kriya yoga were never written down. On the contrary, kriya yoga was always passed from teacher to disciple by word of mouth and by direct instruction. This tradition still holds. In this way, the teacher can ensure that the disciple is ready before undertaking the practice of kriya yoga and that the practices are performed correctly.

There are incomplete references to some of the auxiliary practices of kriya yoga in the classical hatha yoga texts such as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (Light on Hatha Yoga), *Gherand Samhita* (Teachings of Hatha Yoga According to the Sage Gherand), *Shiva Samhita* (Teachings of Yoga according to Shiva) and the *Goraksha Samhita* (Teachings of Yoga according to the Yogi Goraksha). These auxiliary yogic practices are those which are blended together to create the unique structure of the individual kriya-s (practices). However, nowhere in these texts is there any clear and detailed explanation of kriya yoga – certainly not enough to allow us to learn and practise it.

An essential aspect of kriya yoga is *ajapa japa* (a traditional meditation practice which synchronises mantra with the breath). This is mentioned in the above hatha yoga texts and is described in more detail in a number of tantric texts, such as the *Kularnava Tantra* (Ocean of Tantra) and the *Vigyana Bhairava Tantra* (Insight into Reality). Nowhere, however, is its relationship with kriya yoga explicitly explained.

A system similar to kriya yoga was practised in China. A Taoist text entitled the *Tai Chin Hua Tzang Chih* (Secret of the Golden Flower)<sup>9</sup> describes a practice called *shoshuten* (circulation of light). It is similar to kriya yoga in that both are concerned with circulating energy through specific pathways in the body and thereby transmuting energy.

Last century, Swami Yogananda, who travelled and taught widely in Europe and the USA, wrote a well known book entitled *Autobiography of a Yogi*. In it, he refers to kriya yoga which forms an important part

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<sup>9</sup>. Lu Tung-pin. *The Secret of the Golden Flower; a Chinese Book of Life*. Translated and explained by Richard Wilhelm. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954).

of the teachings of the Self-Realisation Fellowship which he founded. He learnt it from his guru, Yuktेशwara Giri, a sannyasi (Hindu monk) who resided in Puri, Orissa, India. He, in turn, received it from his guru, Lahiri Mahasaya, a householder yogi, who lived in Varanasi, north India, who in turn had been initiated into kriya yoga by the almost mythical Himalayan yogi, Babaji. Among others, Swami Yogananda initiated Mahatma Gandhi into kriya yoga.

Sometime last century, it seems that Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh was also initiated into kriya yoga. We don't know by whom or when; possibly by his guru, Swami Vishvananda, whom he is said to have met just once for twenty minutes (though some people say it was for two days). In any case, he passed it on to his disciple, Swami Satyananda Saraswati, founder of the Bihar School of Yoga, who in turn taught it to his disciples, including myself.

The practices of kriya yoga were never put into writing until some thirty-five years ago, when the Bihar School of Yoga published an encyclopaedic textbook on the subject, entitled *A Systematic Course in the Ancient Tantric Techniques of Yoga and Kriya*. Written by myself under the inspiration and guidance of Swami Satyananda, it gives full details of the background, philosophy and techniques of kriya yoga.<sup>10</sup>

Swami Satyananda felt that yoga practitioners worldwide could benefit from kriya yoga, if only they were made aware of its potential and given suitable training. Hence he broke with tradition and published kriya yoga in written form – not so that people could practise from a book, but so that they could be inspired and then take kriya yoga training and initiation from a competent and recognised teacher.

### ***Concentration versus awareness***

Concentration of mind has an important place in yogic practice, although trying to control thoughts is like trying to harness a wild bull or calm an agitated monkey. The mind moves incessantly from one thought to another and the more we try to control it the more it reacts and rebels. We become frustrated and this in itself prevents us going deeper in the practice of meditation. Concentration is easy only for those few people who have already attained some peace of mind, have few unresolved traumas, a deep and relaxed attitude to life and who have attained a high level of fulfilment in their lives. For these people, concentration comes spontaneously, and they can usually make rapid progress on the path of yoga.

But what about those who find concentration difficult, if not impossible? Kriya yoga offers us a way of creating the environment for spontaneous concentration which does not require concentration per se. Unlike most yoga practices, it doesn't demand forced concentration of mind, but accepts its dispersive nature. This means that whilst practising the kriya techniques we don't try to suppress the ever-arising stream of thoughts. Instead, we let the thoughts come and go, identifying more with the inner space in which they arise and subside. In so doing, we become more aware.

It is difficult to explain awareness, but we can say that it is that ever-present, underlying quality or factor within each of us which allows us to be conscious. It is not thought, as such, since we can be aware of,

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<sup>10</sup>. Copies of this book can be obtained from the ashram.



or witness, thought itself. It is there in all of us, in every moment of our lives, but because of habit, or lack of training, we tend to completely identify with the mental processes, the body and with our actions. Through yoga, we start to re-establish contact with this fundamental quality of awareness. Moreover, we start to identify with it more and more. In yogic terminology, to be aware means that we simultaneously identify with this inner conscious Presence, no matter what we may be doing, thinking or feeling. This quality of awareness is self-evident when thinking stops, when we are in a thoughtless state. Hence, the importance given in yoga – be it hatha yoga, or any other form of yoga – to bringing about a thought-free state: it allows us to realise this fundamental quality of our being. Then our life undergoes a radical transformation.

In kriya yoga, we make friends with the mind instead of trying to control it. Eventually, as we continue our practice, the mind automatically becomes less scattered: it starts to flow with the dynamics of the practices, especially with the circulation of energy. This automatically brings about meditation and the mind is rendered receptive to insight.

### ***The tools and structure***

The practices of kriya yoga comprise specific combinations of the following hatha yoga practices:

- *asana-s*<sup>11</sup> (postures)
- *pranayama-s* (breathing techniques)
- *mudra-s* (symbolic gestures and energy directing practices)
- *bandha-s* (physio-psychological locks)

They are integrated in a unique way with specific:

- *mantra-s* (sound patterns)
- visualisations
- *nadi-s* (energy pathways)

In this way, energy is channelled, awakened and transmuted. This opens us up to insight and transformative experience.

Kriya yoga comprises twenty<sup>12</sup> *kriya-s* (practices), which are practised one after the other. This sequence is important since there is a specific interrelation between the dynamics of each kriya, each one laying the groundwork for the following kriya in such a way that the mind is slowly harmonised and harnessed. As an analogy, take music: if the notes are played in the right order, then beautiful music results; if not, we hear just noise. Similarly, with kriya yoga: the unique order of the practices is crucial and allows the full

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<sup>11</sup>. We have shown the plural as *asana-s* (i.e. with a dash) to indicate that this is an anglicized form of the Sanskrit; the same applies to other Sanskrit words in this article.

<sup>12</sup>. Traditionally, it is said that there are 76 *kriya-s*, but in fact these are the sum total of the practices which are moulded together to create the streamlined form of kriya yoga with 20 *kriya-s* that has been practised for hundreds of years, and is still practised in the world today.

benefits to be experienced. Each practice is separate and yet part of a jigsaw which, when each part is in place, creates the perfect inner environment for meditation and insight.

Kriya yoga practices are divided into three groups which automatically lead us through the following stages:

- group 1: *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal)
- group 2: *dharana* (concentration of mental and emotional energies)
- group 3: *dhyana* (the state of meditation)

The first group of nine kriya-s is designed to effortlessly induce *pratyahara*, so that our awareness is disconnected from the five senses and directed inwards. In so doing, we start to explore the inner world of the mind. It has been found by many yogic practitioners that the more we try to shut out external stimuli, the more they bother us. Kriya yoga takes the opposite approach in that no attempt is made to curb the insistent sensory impressions. Instead, the practitioner merely follows the dynamics of each kriya, rotating attention through the prescribed energy pathways, and introspection arises spontaneously. As with many yogic practices, this process of introspection is enhanced by closing the eyes – at least, for some time – during each round of practice.

However, introspection brings another obstruction: we can so easily get lost in mental reverie, the continuously chattering thought processes. Kriya yoga solves this problem by the simple expedient of moving the physical position of the body from one kriya to the next and periodically opening the eyes for some time in each round of practice. This discourages us from getting absorbed in mental babble.

Following this process, our awareness treads the razor's edge between being distracted by outside sensory impressions and getting lost in hazy inner mental processes. In this way, *pratyahara* is induced naturally and we can then move on to the second group of practices.

The second group comprises kriya number ten onwards and is designed to induce *dharana* – concentration of mind. All the practices of this group are practised in one physical position with the eyes closed throughout so that awareness is directed inwards.

As we have said elsewhere, the capacity to concentrate is not easy, especially when the mind is full of anxiety and turmoil. However, it is the experience of many practitioners that the mind spontaneously becomes focused and ready for concentration with the regular practise of the kriya-s in group one and two. Following one of the basic rules of kriya yoga, concentration need not be forced: it will arise as a natural consequence of the practice.

This leads to group three: *dhyana* – meditation – which is not really a practice but the culmination of practice.

## ***Summary***

Kriya yoga does not demand that you subscribe to any stereotypical belief. It works on transforming energy and awakening that which already lies dormant within. It is a system of yoga which is very pertinent for the modern era.