



Kriya Yoga school

Kriya Yoga (Sanskrit: क्रिया योग) is a yoga system which consists of a number of levels of pranayama, mantra, and mudra, intended to rapidly accelerate spiritual development^[2] and engender a profound state of tranquility and God-communion.^[3] It is described by its practitioners as an ancient yoga system revived in modern times by Lahiri Mahasaya, who claimed to be initiated by a guru, Mahavatar Babaji, circa 1861 in the Himalayas. Kriya Yoga was brought to international awareness by Paramahansa Yogananda's book Autobiography of a Yogi and through Yogananda's introductions of the practice to the West from 1920.

Etymology

According to Yogananda, "Kriya is an ancient science. Lahiri Mahasaya received it from his great guru, Babaji, who rediscovered and clarified the technique after it had been lost in the Dark Ages. Babaji renamed it, simply, Kriya Yoga."^[4] In his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, Yogananda further explains that

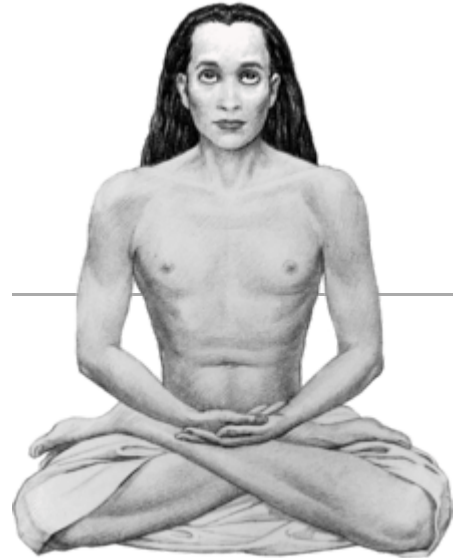
Kriya Yoga is described in certain scriptures as Kabali-pranayama, considered to be the greatest of all techniques in controlling prana (life force) by distilling prana from the breath and thus recharging the body cells. In this way exhalations and inhalations become unnecessary; the cells are recharged by the reinforced bodily life-force and the cosmic life; the physical cells therefore neither change nor decay.^[5]

Jaerschky elucidates that *kabali* (Bengali) is synonymous with *kaivalya* (kevali, kevala),^[6] "isolation," the isolation of purusha (consciousness, spirit) from prakriti (nature or matter, including the human mind and emotions), or the unification with God. According to Jaerschky, *kevali-pranayama* leads to *kevala kumbhaka*, "the natural state of breathlessness, which is the goal of all deep yogis."^[5]

Yoga

The Sanskrit noun योग *yoga* is derived from the root *yuj* (युज्) "to attach, join, harness, yoke"^[7] (*yoga* is a cognate of the English word "yoke"^[8]). According to Timothy Miller, the term yoga may designate various spiritual practices in Hindu traditions, translating it as "union" or "discipline".^[2] In the context of

Kriya Yoga



Mahavatar Babaji

Founder Mahavatar Babaji transmitted to Lahiri Mahasaya
Established 1861^[1]

the *Yoga Sutras*, to which reference is often made to explain the name *Kriya Yoga*, the root *yuj samādhau* (to concentrate) is considered the correct etymology by traditional commentators.^{[9][note 1]}

Kriya

A *kriya* may refer to any kind of practice in the context of yoga, and teachers of psychophysical practices often use the term. Philip Goldberg writes that, as a brand, *Kriya Yoga* generally refers to the lineage that Yogananda represented. He also cites the following definition found in Yogananda's autobiography.^[12] According to Yogananda,

The Sanskrit root of KRIYA is KRI, to do, to act and react; the same root is found in the word KARMA, the natural principle of cause and effect. KRIYA YOGA is thus "union (yoga) with the Infinite through a certain action or rite."^[13]

According to Jones and Ryan, *kriya Yoga* may be literally translated as "yoga of ritual action," noting that it "is contrasted with jnana (learning) yoga and equated with karma (action) yoga in the Trishikhi-Brahmana Upanishad."^[14]

The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* 2.1 defines three types of *kriyā*, namely tapas ("heat," ascetic practices), svadhyaya (study or recitation of the Vedas, or "contemplation, meditation, reflection of one's self"), and *Isvara pranidhana* (devotion or surrender to God).^[note 2] In the Kriya Yoga school, 'ritual action' involves breathing techniques (*pranayama*) revolving the life energy (*prana*) "upward and downward, around the six spinal centers"^[4] and upwards to the crown-chakra.^[14]

Kriya yoga as inner fire ritual

Tanya Lynne Brittain further explains that while "Kriya yoga is 'usually understood to mean 'yoga as practice' or "practical yoga,' [...] it is] also associated with the vocabulary of initiation and sacrifice." The kriya yoga pranayama practices are a form of kundalini-practice, which culminate in *kriya*, the "inner fire rite," the internalized Vedic fire sacrifice.^[16] Yael Bentor further explains that in the Upanishads this internalized fire ritual is associated with the maintenance of life, through breathing and eating. Where the Brahmin maintains the world order by his sacrifices, for the yogi the breath becomes a perpetual ritual. The internalization of the fire is also associated with *tapas*, "heat," burning away the defilements, and with *pranayama*, the control of the breath. These concepts were combined in the yoga of the subtle body.^[17]

Yogananda writes:^[18]

Kriya Yoga is the real "fire rite" oft extolled in the Gita. The yogi casts his human longings into a monotheistic bonfire consecrated to the unparalleled God. This is indeed the true yogic fire ceremony, in which all past and present desires are fuel consumed by love divine. The Ultimate Flame receives the sacrifice of all human madness, and man is pure of dross.

History

The origins of the present-day forms of Kriya Yoga can be traced back to Lahiri Mahasaya, who said he received initiation into the yoga techniques from an immortal Himalayan yogi called Mahavatar Babaji.^{[19][20]} The story of Lahiri Mahasaya receiving initiation into Kriya Yoga by Mahavatar Babaji in 1861 is recounted in *Autobiography of a Yogi*.^{[21][22]} Yogananda wrote that at that meeting, Mahavatar Babaji told Lahiri Mahasaya, "The Kriya Yoga that I am giving to the world through you in this nineteenth century, is a revival of the same science that Krishna gave millenniums ago to Arjuna; and was later known to Patanjali, and Christ, and to St. John, St. Paul, and other disciples."^[3] Yogananda also wrote in *God Talks With Arjuna: The Bhagavad Gita* that the science of Kriya Yoga was given to Manu, the original Adam, and through him to Janaka and other royal sages.^{[23][24]}

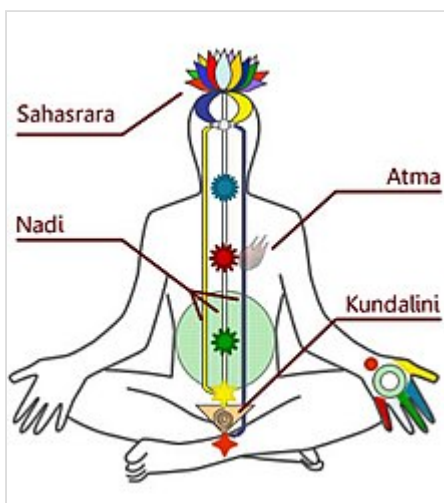


Lahiri Mahasaya (1828–1895).

Through Lahiri Mahasaya, Kriya Yoga soon spread throughout India.^[3] Lahiri Mahasaya's disciples included his two sons (Dukouri Lahiri and Tinkouri Lahiri), Sri Yukteswar Giri, Panchanan Bhattacharya, Swami Pranabananda, Swami Kealananda, Keshavananda Brahmachari, Bhupendranath Sanyal (Sanyal Mahasaya), and many others.^[25]

Kriya Yoga was brought to international awareness by Paramahansa Yogananda, a disciple of Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri, with his book *Autobiography of a Yogi*^{[2][3]} and through Yogananda's introductions of the practice to the West from 1920.^{[26][27][28]}

Practice



The chakras

Kriya Yoga, as taught by Lahiri Mahasaya, is traditionally learned exclusively via the Guru-disciple relationship, and the initiation consists of a secret ceremony.^{[29][2]} He recounted that after his initiation into Kriya Yoga, "Babaji instructed me in the ancient rigid rules which govern the transmission of the yogic art from Guru to disciple."^[30] Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* mentions the practice of Kriya Yoga, but it doesn't provide details about how to practice specific techniques. Rizwan Virk writes that "The purpose of the book was to inspire readers to take up the yogic path by opening their minds to spiritual possibilities."^[31]

In Yogananda's 6 October 1920 speech at the International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston, he said that the Kriya Yoga of his lineage "consists of magnetizing the spinal column and the brain, which contain the seven main centers, with the result that the distributed life electricity is drawn back to the original centers", thus liberating the

"spiritual Self" from physical and mental distractions. Yogananda used the word *centers* in place of the term chakras. Philip Goldberg writes that Yogananda described Kriya Yoga in essentially the same way in *Autobiography of a Yogi*.^[32] Yogananda wrote:^[3]

The Kriya Yogi mentally directs his life energy to revolve, upward and downward, around the six spinal centers (medullary, cervical, dorsal, lumbar, sacral, and coccygeal plexuses) which correspond to the twelve astral signs of the zodiac, the symbolic Cosmic Man. One half-minute of revolution of energy around the sensitive spinal cord of man effects subtle progress in his evolution; that half-minute of Kriya equals one year of natural spiritual unfoldment.

The practice of Kriya Yoga involves specific breathing patterns.^[14] Yogananda claims that the process of performing Kriya Yoga leads to a certain purification of the blood which frees up the life force to withdraw into the spine:^[33]

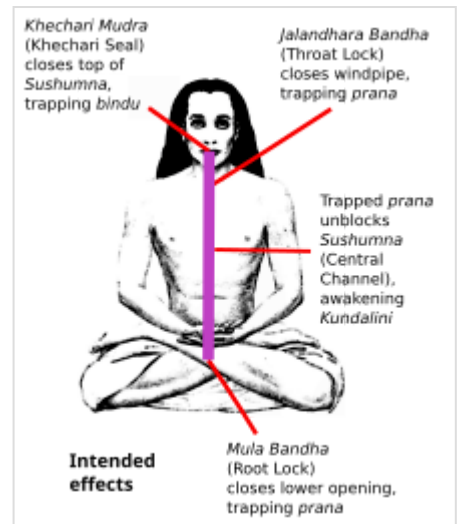
Kriya Yoga is a simple, psycho-physiological method by which the human blood is decarbonized and recharged with oxygen. The atoms of this extra oxygen are transmuted into life current to rejuvenate the brain and spinal centers. By stopping the accumulation of venous blood, the yogi is able to lessen or prevent the decay of tissues; the advanced yogi transmutes his cells into pure energy. Elijah, Jesus, Kabir and other prophets were past masters in the use of Kriya or a similar technique, by which they caused their bodies to materialize and dematerialize at will.

Satyananda Giri writes that "Kriya sadhana may be thought of as the sadhana of the 'practice of being in Atman'".^[34]

There are many higher kriyas in the kriya yoga tradition. According to the *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Lahiri Mahasaya divided Kriya Yoga into four parts. The second, third and the fourth Kriya are known as higher Kriyas, Thokar Kriya being one of them.^{[3][34]}

Sources and inspirations

According to Yogananda, the elusive Mahavatar Babaji introduced the concept of *Kriya Yoga pranayama* as essentially identical to the Raja Yoga of Patanjali and the concept of Yoga as described in the *Bhagavad Gita*.^[3] According to Yogananda, Kriya Yoga was well known in ancient India, but was eventually lost, due to "priestly secrecy and man's indifference".^[3]



Simplified diagram of the mode of action of Mudras and Bandhas on the Sushumna, leading to liberation in Hatha Yoga philosophy. The subtle fluids affected have numerous names including prana, bindu, and amrit.

A direct disciple of Sri Yukteswar Giri, Sailendra Dasgupta (d. 1984) has written that, "Kriya entails several acts that have evidently been adapted from the Gita, the Yoga Sutras, Tantra shastras and from conceptions on the Yugas."^[29]

Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita does not teach *Kriya Yoga pranayama* by name, but Yogananda claimed that the fundamental idea of the practice – control over the mind and the body's energy (*prana*) – is expressed therein. In his commentary on the Gita, God Talks with Arjuna, Yogananda asserts that Krishna reveals the "safe path" of Kriya Yoga to the disciple Arjuna in the Gita. Specifically, Yogananda claims that verses IV:29 and V:27–28 about breath control and meditation describe the essential concepts of Kriya Yoga.^[35] According to Yogananda's commentary, Krishna describes Kriya Yoga thusly:

By the concentrated practice of Kriya Yoga pranayama—offering the inhaling breath into the exhaling breath (*prana* into *apana*) and offering the exhaling breath into the inhaling breath (*apana* into *prana*)—the yogi neutralizes these two life currents and their resulting mutations of decay and growth, the causative agents of breath and heart action and concomitant body consciousness. By recharging the blood and cells with life energy that has been distilled from breath and reinforced with the pure spiritualized life force in the spine and brain, the Kriya Yogi stops bodily decay, thereby quieting the breath and heart by rendering their purifying actions unnecessary. The yogi thus attains conscious life-force control.^[36]

Yogananda also stated that Krishna was referring to *Kriya Yoga pranayama* when "Krishna ... relates that it was he, in a former incarnation, who communicated the indestructible yoga to an ancient illuminato, Vivasvat, who gave it to Manu, the great legislator. He, in turn, instructed Ikshwaku, the father of India's solar warrior dynasty."^[3]

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

According to Yogananda, "Kriya Yoga is mentioned twice by the ancient sage Patanjali, foremost exponent of yoga, who wrote: 'Kriya Yoga consists of body discipline, mental control, and meditating on Aum.'—Yoga Sutras II:1."^[4]

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali 2.1 actually uses the term *kriya yoga* when describing a "yoga of action (*kriyayoga*)," defining three types of *kriya* (action):

The yoga of action (*kriyayoga*) is: asceticism (*tapas*), recitation (*svadhyaya*), and devotion (*pranidhana*) to Ishvara (the lord).

According to George Feuerstein, this *kriya yoga* is contained in chapter 1, chapter 2 verse 1-27, chapter 3 except verse 54, and chapter 4.^[37] The "eight limb yoga" is described in chapter 2 verse 28–55, and chapter 3 verse 3 and 54.^{[37][note 3]}



Patañjali statue (traditional form indicating Kundalini or incarnation of Shesha)

According to Barbara Miller, *Kriya yoga* as described in the *Yoga Sutras* is the "active performance of yoga."^[41] It is part of the niyamas, "observances", the second limb of Patanjali's eight limbs.^{[41][note 4]}

Yogananda stated that Patanjali wrote a second time about the *Kriya Yoga pranayama* technique when he wrote: "Liberation can be attained by that pranayama which is accomplished by disjoining the course of inspiration and expiration" (YS 2.49).^{[3][4]}

Guru–shishya parampara of Kriya Yoga

The lineage of Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF)/Yogoda Satsanga Society of India (YSS), founded by Paramahansa Yogananda includes Bhagavan Krishna, Jesus Christ, Mahavatar Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya, Sri Yukteswar Giri and Paramahansa Yogananda. According to SRF, Yogananda stated, before his passing, that it was "God's wish that he be the last in the SRF line of Gurus."^[43] Yogananda said that his writings, especially those compiled in SRF's home-study course (the *SRF Lessons*), would facilitate the spiritual instruction of disciples after his death.^[44] When questioned about the succession of SRF/YSS leadership, Yogananda answered, "There will always be at the head of this organization men and women of realization. They are already known to God and the Gurus. They shall serve as my spiritual successor and representative in all spiritual and organizational matters."^[45]

According to the Kriya Yoga Institute, their lineage includes Mahavatar Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya, Sri Yukteswar Giri, Shrimat Bhupendranath Sanyal Mahashaya, Paramahansa Yogananda, Satyananda Giri, and Hariharananda Giri.^[46] Hariharananda Giri was a disciple of Sri Yukteswar Giri and managed one of Yogananda's *ashrams* in India until 1959. He began visiting the United States in 1975 and established the Kriya Yoga Institute in Homestead, Florida.^[47]

See also

- List of yoga schools
- Khecarī mudrā
- Samadhi

Notes

1. In accordance with Pāṇini, Vyasa (who wrote the first commentary on the *Yoga Sutras*)^[10] says that yoga means samadhi (concentration).^[11]
2. David Gordon White writes that "while [Yogananda] called his particular synthesis 'Kriya Yoga', the term used for 'practical yoga' in *Yoga Sutras* 2.1-27, Patanjali's work is conspicuously absent from his writings."^[15]
3. The *Yoga Sutras* are generally viewed as a compendium of multiple traditions of yoga.^{[37][38][39]} According to Feuerstein, the *Yoga Sutras* are a condensation of two different traditions, namely "eight limb yoga" (*ashtanga yoga*) and action yoga (*Kriyā yoga*),^[37] the description of the eight limbs being an interpolation into the text on *kriya*.^[40]
4. Miller also notes that some commentators regard the first five limbs together as *kriya yoga*, but that Patanjali himself states *kriya yoga* to be a subset of the second limb.^[42]

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