



Singer and yoga teacher Kathryn McCusker reveals how practising 'the yoga of awareness' can help us unlock our creative sides and create a sense of balance.

# Introduction To Kundalini Yoga

**M**ake yourself so happy that when others look at you they become happy, too," Kundalini yoga guru Yogi Bhaajan once said.

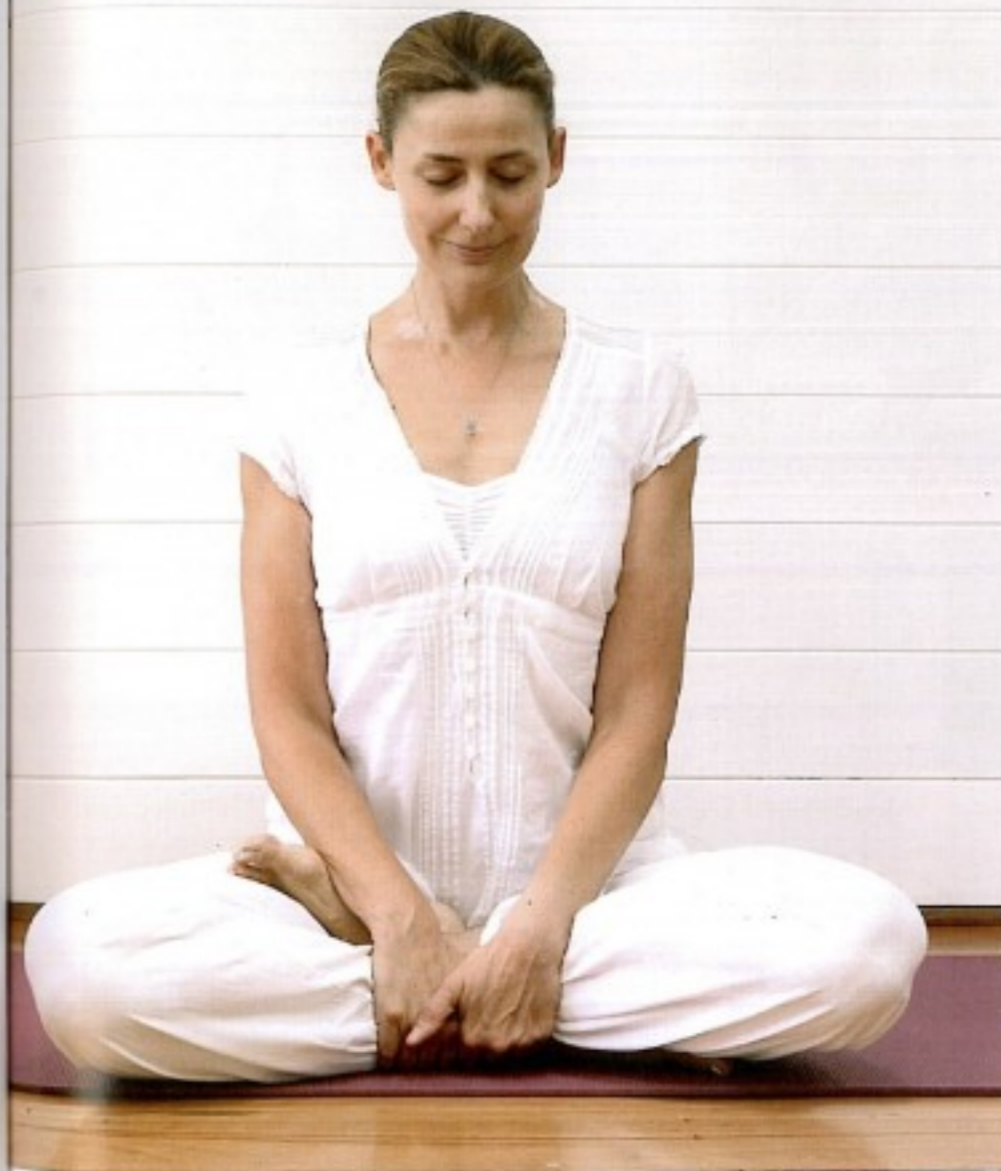
In the late 1960s, Yogi Bhaajan brought Kundalini yoga from the Northern Punjab region of India to the West. His vision was to share the secret teachings of an ancient lineage of gurus dating back 5000 years, as an alternative to the drug-fuelled altered states of consciousness that perpetuated Western culture at the time. Now, Kundalini yoga, also known as the 'yoga of awareness', has a worldwide following of devotees seeking out the path to physical, emotional and spiritual contentment that it advocates.

If Sydney-based Kundalini yoga teacher and opera singer Kathryn McCusker is anything to go by, it works. Aside from looking far younger than her years, she radiates a sense of inner contentment and professes that she can't remember the last time she was sick. But that hasn't always been the case. As an award-winning soprano with Opera Australia, Opéra de Massy, the Vienna State Opera and the English National Opera, to name a few, she had spent more than 10 years living between Europe and Australia, travelling the world and getting sick because of it.

In 2001, in a bid to boost her immune system, McCusker consulted an acupuncturist, Guru Dharam, who also happened to be a Kundalini yoga teacher trainer. Despite having dabbled in other forms of yoga, McCusker connected with Kundalini immediately. She returned to London, signed up to a two-year teacher-training course and has been happily teaching and singing around the world since.

"I was energised by the practice, but also felt calm and peaceful," McCusker says. "I think it is because of the way Kundalini balances the physical, emotional and mental aspects, and channels my creativity from a deeply meditative state."

A Kundalini session can be as long as three hours or as brief as 15 minutes, but always combines movement with powerful breathing techniques, mantras, mudras (hand positions) and meditation. The goal is to raise the 'Kundalini energy' that resides in the lower spine. According to Kundalini yoga philosophy, this energy is the source of our power and creative potential, but for most of us, it remains 'stuck' or dormant through fear, ill health or lack of awareness. For that reason, McCusker explains, it tends to attract creative types – musicians, dancers and writers – but she says it is designed for people working and living in the real world. Kundalini yoga has also been lauded for its many health benefits. **➤**



## Introductory Kriya For Spinal Flexibility

A 'kriya' is a set of exercises designed to work on a particular part of the body, or achieve a specific result on a mind or spiritual level. This set is perfect for beginners and especially good for people with back problems or who sit at a desk all day. These exercises improve the flexibility of the spine and the circulation of spinal fluid, which is good for mental clarity and memory. This kriya also stimulates the chakras (energy centres) along the spine, strengthens and balances the nervous and glandular systems, improves posture, and helps deal with tension and stress. The kriya takes 15-20 minutes and is best performed first thing in the morning. McCusker recommends practising three times a week initially, gradually building up to a daily practice.

**Note:** The breath, like in any yoga practice, is an important part of Kundalini yoga. Breathe in and out through the nose, focusing on expanding your belly from the navel centre as you inhale, and contracting the navel back towards the spine as you exhale. These exercises are performed with the eyes closed looking towards the 'third eye' (located between the eyebrows). Closing the eyes helps stimulate the pituitary gland (which governs hormonal levels). It also helps you to focus internally so you are not distracted, which gives you access to your intuition.



## 1. Spinal Flex

Start by sitting in Easy Pose (legs crossed with one foot resting on top of your thigh), holding your ankles with both hands. Inhale as you push your chest forward, at the same time drawing your shoulders back. Exhale, contracting the spine back in the opposite direction keeping your head parallel to the ground. Repeat 26 times. **▶**