

Kripalu Yoga: A Metaphor for Life

From the Kripalu Center archives

The purpose of yoga is the removal of all forms of suffering – the removal of all the ways in which we dissipate our vital life force. The purpose of any yogic discipline is transcendence of all the limitations that keep us from experiencing the limitless spirit that we are. The practice of yoga has only one true aim – to transcend the self-created, self-acquired mental, physical, and emotional inhibitions that keep us from experiencing the unlimited force that is inborn within us.

Kripalu Yoga is both a way of identifying the obstructions that you create in your path and the method for removing them.

You can call Kripalu Yoga holistic yoga because it involves the body, mind, and soul in one practice. You can call it transcendental yoga because its aim is transcendence of all individually acquired limitations and conditionings that keep you from self-realization. Self-realization refers to the Self you really are, beyond the self you encounter on a superficial level.

You can call it the dance of Shiva, where the dancer and the dance become one. It is an experience of oneness, where all the divisions that have been created between body and mind or mind and spirit are unified, and all your various aspects are harmonized so that you become whole and total.

You can also call it the yoga of ecstasy, because when you are whole and total, wanting nothing other than what is happening in that moment, and there is no internal stress, conflict, indecision, doubt, or criticism, then ecstasy naturally begins to emerge.

Kripalu Yoga is the yoga of energy. The intention is to allow energy to move into your body, rather than moving it willfully. In Kripalu Yoga you move from inner urges, guided by the body's energy. So the technique of Kripalu Yoga is designed to awaken the body to its own inner wisdom.

Kripalu Yoga begins when you are not striving, struggling, forcing, or fighting in any form. Every frustration is a subtle fight. Every time you make yourself frustrated, every time you judge yourself, you create a fight within. The life force that is flowing from within is blocked by conflict.

The heart of Kripalu Yoga is to allow postures to emerge from a meditative state of consciousness, spontaneously and effortlessly with inwardly directed attention.

All the guidelines that are given for the practice of Kripalu Yoga help you move toward that kind of internal experience. So the emphasis of the practice of Kripalu Yoga is on becoming more and more conscious of your unconscious internal attitudes, insecurities, and fears, as well as your ways of creating tensions with them. Through this practice you can learn to tune out of the mind and into the intelligent energy that moves you naturally, spontaneously, and effortlessly.

In keeping with this purpose, in the true spirit of yoga, Kripalu developed a new way of entering into yoga postures that minimizes the amount of instruction necessary and at the same time helps you go directly into your internal experience with meditative awareness.

The Kripalu approach to yoga, using specific "press points", enables you to attain alignment in the posture with very few verbal details, so that the mind can immediately focus on the sensations in the body. The press points facilitate alignment so that longer holding of the posture is possible, safely and easily, no matter what your level of flexibility.

In the beginning stage, Kripalu Yoga is practiced in pairs of postures. The first posture is a traditional hatha yoga posture. Spontaneous movements that emerge directly from your body's own guidance are the second "posture".

It is this special way of holding the posture that gives rise to spontaneous movements, even from the very first day of practice. This is what produces the experience of Kripalu Yoga meditation--in-motion. With practice, more spontaneous movements emerge from a single willfully assumed posture and eventually become a posture flow, the full experience of Kripalu Yoga.

It is the holding the posture with specific attitudes; paying attention to the inner feelings and sensations with awareness, concentration, and relaxation that facilitate the spontaneous complementary posture to emerge. In the very beginning the movements may not feel spontaneous, but if your body feels an urge to move into a position that naturally helps you to compensate for the tensions created by the previous posture, then that is your body's own inner wisdom guiding you. Even if you know no traditional yoga postures, if you hold any position for a long period of time, what your body will move into to get rid of the acquired tensions can be called a complementary posture.

In Kripalu Yoga the holding of the postures happens in three stages. In the first stage of holding a posture, you go as far as you can into the position and then hold in order to discover those physical limitations (experienced as tensions) that keep you from moving any further into that particular posture.

At this stage, you are intentionally encountering existing bodily limitations and resistances, such as stiffness in your joints and muscles from non-use or from improper physical habits. Holding the posture at this level can become a very powerful vehicle to show you where you are in that moment. And the way to progress from that point is to accept your physical condition unconditionally.

Regardless of how relaxed or tense you are, whether you are flexible or inflexible, whether you are used to stretching those muscles or not, you will face some kind of tension the moment you reach a "toleration point." That is the point which your physical resistances will not allow you to go without forcing. Reaching and relaxing into the physical toleration point is the first stage of holding a posture in Kripalu Yoga.

If you continue to hold a posture consciously at the toleration point, you will almost certainly begin to experience the second stage; your own mentally induced concepts and fears about your

physical limitations. Whenever you encounter your body with the intention of transcending tensions that work through the body, your mind will begin to panic. You will invariably encounter some fears that come directly from your self-image, your adopted concepts about your body and what it can or can't and should or shouldn't do. Consciously or unconsciously, you may think, "this posture is too difficult for me," or "I could injure myself doing this."

You may also be fearful about an actual lack of flexibility or a very real pain you are experiencing as you try to get into the posture or to hold it longer. At that time, it is important that you stay very conscious so that you may both recognize and respect your real physical limits and come to know, in an experimental way, how you tend to snap into your self-adopted mental and emotional limitations, which surface as fears and can be released through heightened awareness.

The second stage of holding plays a very important role. You must work diligently for as long as necessary to learn how to hold the posture through this point of physical awareness. In this way, you will learn to let the body deal directly and intuitively with its already acquired tensions, without adding any new ones, imposed by your mental concepts.

This is an opportunity for you to learn how to be in your body fully, without struggling or coercing the body to fit your mental image of yourself and your flexibility.

As you stay with a posture beyond the second stage of holding, you may continue to experience discomfort or even outright pain in the areas of your body that are being stretched. But at this third stage of holding, you are not struggling or forcing the body into the posture. Rather, you are simply allowing the body in its own innate wisdom to move toward its natural toleration point for that posture, without any interference.

As you continue to hold, you gradually drop out of your mind and enter into the realm of pure feeling. Paradoxically at this point, you will enter into a deeply relaxed state at the same time that you may be experiencing the tension or discomfort of being in a strenuous physical position.

While holding the position in such a relaxed and concentrated way, the body may begin to quiver. You may feel intense heat, pain, or shaking; an emotional release may come. As the body begins to let go of its accumulated tensions and the mind no longer interrupts, prana, the life-force energy, is free to take over. Suddenly, you feel as if you could hold this position forever.

This direct experience of the body's energy, without distortions from the mind, will invariably lead you into a state of gentle ecstasy. As your mind dissolves into the body and its moment-to-moment sensations, the body begins to enter into pure experience.

Naturally, this makes you more flexible than you were from pushing and forcing with your body-mind. But that's only the external manifestation. Internally, your mind becomes so totally absorbed in this release of energy that it is flooded. You begin to experience the disarming of the ego.

And as the ego barriers collapse, your body, mind and ego merge into pure cosmic energy, without the boundaries of "I" and "you". There is no longer a separation between the experience and the one who experiences. You become all one energy. In this state of ecstasy, where the wisdom of the body takes over from the ego-mind, some of the subtlest psychosomatic tensions are released, promoting ever deeper states of relaxation and meditation.

This is a very different experience indeed from the one you would have had if you had continued to hold the posture willfully with your ego-mind.

By allowing the body, in its own wisdom, to stretch and hold as much as it can without the interference of derogatory mental comments and unrealistic expectations, you begin to develop trust and faith in your body and in yourself. This stage of Kripalu Yoga offers a metaphor, a gateway into every life situation where you encounter the fears that come from trying to transcend present limits or concepts.

In such challenging life situations, there are two different ways to go. Either you can say, "Well, I have had enough of this; this is just too painful," and then buy into all the limiting beliefs you hold about yourself, and escape through distraction and regret. Or you can choose to break through the established limitations and fears by "holding the posture", staying with the painful experience and relaxing into it as much as you can (sensation is not necessarily pain although it could be).

You always have the opportunity to remain in witness consciousness, choosing neither fight nor flight, neither suppressing nor expressing the uncomfortable feelings you are facing. Then, just as in the deeply held posture, you can enter into the pure experience of life as it is, uncolored by your concepts or your fears and tune into the ecstasy that is always available.

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