

Contemplating Yoga

From the Kripalu Center archives

Imagine what often happens in the course of doing yoga. Most of the time your mind gets easily distracted, drifting into daydreams or becoming impatient with your progress. Before you know it, you've left your body doing postures on the yoga mat, while your mind is out shopping or comparing your performance with others and feeling miserable. Whatever the source of mental chatter, you believe you're practicing yoga, but you're really creating internal conflict. That dissipates your life force. In the yoga we teach, Kripalu Yoga, the aim of practice is to conserve energy by on goingly keeping your mind anchored in physical experience, paying close attention to the minutest sensations happening in the body.

While performing postures, you become so absorbed that you are no longer there; merging totally into the movement. By focusing so one-pointedly, you dissolve the actor into the action. When the actor is no longer present, there is only meditation.... the experience of oneness.

Kripalu Yoga postures are not for the mastery of physical skills, they are vehicles for self-mastery. Ordinarily, when one practices hatha yoga, his or her attention is focused on perfecting the posture, increasing flexibility or reducing tension. Although these are worthwhile goals, yoga can take you to a greater depth, creating a communication system within your body, based in conscious awareness. During the practice of postures in Kripalu Yoga, you use your finely tuned awareness to release tensions that surface in the body and fears that arise in the mind. Whenever you orient your yoga practice exclusively to the physical benefits, the free interaction between your body, mind and spirit is missed. In Kripalu Yoga, one is aligned with total reality, recognizing how we are holistically and simultaneously interacting between the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels of our being.

The true purpose of yoga is integration. In Kripalu Yoga, by assuming the yoga posture, or asana, using deep breathing and various stages of holding, you apply effort to appropriately engage your mind, at the same time relaxing fully. Proceeding through the stages of holding, the posture, you anchor your mind even more deeply into physical experience. On any spiritual journey, what is sought in the end must be present in the beginning in seed form; thus you apply conscious awareness at each stage and observe the flowering of new insights and awareness as your yoga practice unfolds.

Imagine for example, that you're doing the camel posture. Taking your time, you prepare the ground to enter the pose fully, creating an internal environment of safety and relaxation. Once you've held the position a short period, you may experience physical discomfort. At that point, you simply take deep breaths and relax, accepting the discomfort without judging yourself. While the first phase of holding reveals physical tensions that keep you from moving deeper into the pose, the next phase reveals mental and emotional resistance. So, now your mind may pipe up with the thought that you can't hold any longer, or the fear that you may get hurt. As you continue to hold the posture, by bringing your attention back into physical sensation, you consciously let go of all fears, breathing deeply and relaxing as you dive more deeply into the

experience of the present moment. There is no undue force or struggle and suddenly you're holding with no mind; in fact, your body is holding itself.

Entering a whole new dimension, your movement flows directly from the wisdom of the body. At this point, the energy of prana, the life force, freed from mental or emotional constraints, accelerates its healing, regenerative function.

As a result of holding the posture, quieting your mind and focusing your attention even more deeply, your energy then carries out the most subtle adjustments needed. No amount of twisting or bending could possibly reach those tensions which are so deeply embedded in your body. By bringing the full force of your energy to bear in whatever realm was hidden before, consciousness forges a new connection, bringing about spontaneous healing and integration.

In the absence of conscious awareness, effort and struggle in yoga are counterproductive and fail to bring about integration. In Kripalu Yoga, integration comes through transcending, not seeking to upgrade the functions of body, mind and emotions. When you practice with total focus and concentration, you enter "witness consciousness", which lets you transcend physical, mental and emotional blockages without struggle. That is because you are absorbed in the experience without judging or taking sides, accepting the full range of sensation surfacing from the unconscious. The result is joy and freedom. You develop faith in your capacity to access witness consciousness, expanding into other areas of your life where tension or fears surface. Conscious encounters with your body provide a metaphor for daily life situations. Choosing not to struggle, you learn to relax instead and enter deeply into your experience, transcending, the limits of the mind.

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