

How to Love Yourself: The Art of Kripalu Yoga

From the Kripalu Center archives

Kripalu Yoga fundamentally teaches you how to love yourself. While practicing, you may not do anything about love itself, but you are dropping fears. It is true that to whatever extent you can let go of your fears, to that degree you have the capacity to love yourself.

A fearless person always has the capacity to choose what is in their best interest. But when you are afraid, all your perceptions get distorted; likewise, your conclusions and choices. In order to return to that source where you experience reality without distortion, you need to let go of your fears. Kripalu Yoga provides you a practical framework in which that can happen.

It's through the holding of postures that you encounter your fears. And when you hold a posture where tension surfaces; you need to determine if the obstacle lies in holding the posture or the fear of holding the posture. Usually it's the fear. In order to open into greater freedom in your body, it will then be important to face those fears. The postures provide you with the opportunity to explore the endlessness of awareness and sensation in your body. This is different than pain, even though pain itself is a sensation. For some, as soon as you even think of doing certain postures, you feel afraid. If I begin to lead the Camel Posture, I know that many of you will go into a panic, thinking, "how long is he going to have me hold it?" If your body had some flexibility before, it certainly has less available to do the posture now that you've entertained your fears.

A posture should be challenging but not painful. Explore each posture at your comfortable toleration point. Sensations should be felt, not ignored. Back off until the sensations are tolerable. As you hold a posture you may begin to experience discomfort; this happens when you stop being present in the pose and go too far, or when you try to perform instead of explore in a particular pose. When you've gone as far as you can reach comfortably, relax, breathe and stay present. In most cases less is more.

So when you reach your toleration point and those fears surface, such as "I want to get out of this," or "I don't want to hurt myself," witness what is happening to you, and understand this process. Even if you don't have a history of being hurt, the possibility of pain will invariably be enough to bring up fear and tension inside you. And that tension will keep you from holding the posture or relaxing enough to go deeper into the experience. If you relax into the posture you will be able to hold the posture with less discomfort. And as your endurance (ability to hold) increases you will release deeper and deeper levels of tension trapped in your body.

Tensions are lodged in your body as a result of poor eating habits, overindulgence, poor elimination of toxins and other problems and you experience this tension as joint stiffness or inflexibility. These tensions reduce bodily function efficiency. In most cases you have no idea

what the real source of the problem is, but by doing Kripalu Yoga you have the opportunity to encounter these tensions firsthand. That's the beginning of the process.

It is true that in some poses the tension or fear you experience is appropriate for that posture. I'm not saying ignore your fears or force your body to do something that's entirely too difficult. But know the difference between real and imaginary fears. Allow yourself to fully experience what's happening to you while you're in the posture, then decide if it is appropriate, or is there room to go beyond. When you go beyond that point, deeper into the posture, invariably you will come to another stage where you feel more relaxed and absorbed while holding the posture. The posture seems to hold itself. The experience and the one experiencing become one and the same. You feel as though you could hold forever. The energy takes over as soon as the mind gives up. This is important to remember. If you know the secret of how to let go of your mind you can apply it in any situation. After a while you'll find that you can do this right from the beginning.

Yoga can become a very powerful vehicle to recognize where you are. When you perform a posture, you'll immediately recognize where tensions are stored in your body. At that time it's important, in order to let go of the mental and emotional tensions at play, to accept the stiffness or pain for exactly what it is. If you dislike it or feel frustrated because you can't reach the full expression of the pose then you're not accepting yourself. And if you're not accepting yourself, all of a sudden you begin to produce even more tension. Of course this is counterproductive and not what the practice of yoga is all about. In Kripalu Yoga you honor your limitation; they are your physical connection to your mental and spiritual realms. Although physical tensions may reveal to you your past, your weaknesses, or whatever lifestyle you've chosen to live, the way to proceed from that point on is to accept whatever your condition is.

When you enter into witness consciousness, and when you experience stiffness, instead of saying, "I am stiff," you say, "this body has become stiff." Then you don't identify with any limitations in your consciousness, and you won't experience the sting of emotion that goes with such thoughts. You remain witness and automatically the tensions and emotions will disappear.

The alternative is, not to stay in the witness consciousness and to identify with your negative thoughts. Then you'll begin to hate yourself for being so stiff or holding too much tension. That identification will throw you back into the old negative pattern. But the witness awareness will help you dissolve these patterns because you have entered into that place where you rise above limitations. You are using consciousness to bypass them. You are witness to the changes, and at the same time you are not affected by any of those changes. When prana and consciousness meet together like that, the result is ecstasy!

As you practice Kripalu Yoga you will have many opportunities to know that ecstasy. As you explore and hold a posture past your limits, you will experience the release of Pranic energy which carries out some of the most subtle adjustments your body needs. No amount of twisting or bending could possibly reach those kinds of tensions which are so deeply embedded in the body.

You can experience this energy going to work to heal you, bringing you a sense of freedom that you never experienced before, mentally and physically. That kind of pleasure is not limited to

physical or emotional pleasure; it's spiritual too. That's the joy of overcoming the inhibitions which have kept you from being in tune with reality. Through that means your love for practice increases. When you break through your fears, a whole new dimension opens up for you, and you feel like you're bathed in the energy of love. You may never have said, "I am loving myself" while doing postures but that is what you are doing. Letting go of fear, you are free to experience ecstasy.

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By Tony Riposo