

Dissolving into freedom: Swami Kripalu's energetic posture series

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by Yoganand Michael Carroll

The only record we have of Amrit Desai's asana training before his arrival in the United States is the story he told of teaching himself postures from a poster hung in his neighborhood gym. Amrit didn't learn hatha yoga practices from his guru, Swami Kripalu, until much later, when he began making trips back to India with his American followers in the 1970s. It was there that Amrit's disciples had the opportunity to study Swami Kripalu's approach to asana and meditation, as detailed in his 900-page book, *Asana and Mudra*.

Never fully translated, *Asana and Mudra* includes some 200 yoga postures, whose intention and practice are very different from those we know. The focus is inward, with an emphasis on the trunk, pelvis and neck rather than the limbs. The postures are practiced with breath retention, locks and drishti (focusing the inner gaze on specific body parts affected by the posture).

The purpose of this practice is to build energy, or prana. Swami Kripalu believed that generating energy in the body and mind was transformational and could bring about healing and integration. This biologically-based spiritual technology originated with the Pashupata Marga, a tantric path that may have been the original yoga. Pashupata Marga's origins are lost from recorded history, but symbols associated with the Pashupatas have been found in archeological excavations of four to five thousand-year-old civilizations. The foremost teacher of this sect, Lakulisha, lived sometime between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D., but Swami Kripalu considered him his primary teacher, claiming that he had been visited by Lakulisha during meditation. According to the *Pashupata Sutra*, the followers of this path cultivated states of ecstatic energy through intense, high-energy disciplines (*tapas*), including practices working with sexual energy and radical devotion to Hindu deities (bhakti yoga). The ultimate goal of these practices was freedom from something called *ahamkara*.

Translated literally as "self-shape," ahamkara is in essence the ego—a collection of ideas and beliefs about who we are that we construct as we grow up, a sanctuary that we struggle to protect, defend and maintain throughout our lives. For the Pashupata Marga, and many other yoga traditions, the ahamkara was considered a bondage to be discarded. By flooding it with energy, the Pashupatas hoped to dissolve the ahamkara; each time they returned from the experience of dissolution, they would be freer, the tapas having washed to the surface suppressed fears, emotion and negative belief systems. On the other side of these intense practices, they believed, lay the experience of deep peace, the peace that comes not from suppressing emotion but from moving through it. (These ideas tie in closely with Freud's and Wilhelm Reich's concepts of the unconscious.) Swami Kripalu believed that the highest expression of this practice was the formation of a divine body, a literal immortality.

According to his teachings, the first step in this step-by-step path to freedom is the building of a strong container. Once the container is safely established, the practitioner can graduate to the practice of flooding it with prana. In modern times, the belief is that

the container is essential and that only when it is in place can we allow energy and emotion to flow through us and fully embody the entire spectrum of who we are. In many ways, the Kripalu Yoga of today fits Swami Kripalu's model of energetic transformation. We use asana to release deep-seated tension and fears and to bring about integration and healing in the psychological, emotional and physical bodies. Stage I of Kripalu Yoga builds the container, or ahamkara, with restraint and willful practice. Stages II and III build energy through a focus on breath, long holding times and sitting with whatever comes up.

As we look to deepen our practice of Kripalu, it is extremely valuable to gain an understanding of Swami Kripalu's original teachings. In my program, *Asanas as Spiritual Doorways*, participants will learn four or five postures each day, explore the philosophy underlying the practices and begin to get a sense of the effect of the practice. We'll look at contexts for these teachings, finding ways in which they can be integrated into yoga practice and daily life.

Living in this culture, most of us have a multitude of ways to spend energy. Our ahamkara and our minds become comfortable at a certain energy level and we strive to maintain that level rather than to conserve energy. We find that our self-esteem is directly linked to our energy level. Notice in your life and in your practice on the mat the ways in which you hold tight to your ahamkara, the ways in which you tend to push away, modulate or filter your experience. Notice how rich life becomes when we relax those controls and are simply in the moment.

If we can understand the value of tapas, of discipline not for discipline's sake but for the purpose of raising energy, we can learn much about ourselves. We can learn to ride the highs and lows of the ahamkara, to sit with energy generated, intentionally or naturally, even when it's uncomfortable, until the moment of integration inevitably occurs. Every step we take toward increasing our tolerance for prana and integrating what it brings up, without needing to stabilize our image of ourselves, leads us closer to freedom. As Arjuna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, "No effort is wasted on this path."

Yoganand Michael Carroll is a Master-Level teacher in the Kripalu Yoga tradition. Through many years of intensive study and practice of the Kripalu approach to yoga, Yoganand has gained a profound facility to distil and interpret esoteric yoga texts and techniques. After studying with Kripalu Yoga masters in India and America, Yoganand taught at Kripalu Center for more than 15 years before founding Radiant Well-being Yoga Center in North Augusta, South Carolina, where he leads Kripalu and Pranakriya Yoga Teacher Training and a variety of other programs. Yoganand is registered with the National Yoga Alliance as an E-RYT500 level teacher..