



Kripalu Yoga

**A Guide to Practice
On and off the Mat**

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KRIPALU YOGA

*A Guide to Practice
On and Off the Mat*

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This book reflects the spiritual practice and heartfelt aspiration

of thousands of people over many years.

It is dedicated to everyone East and West

who has practiced, served, and taught

in the Kripalu Yoga tradition.

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Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health



In Kripalu Yoga, you learn many of the same postures as in other yoga classes, but the emphasis is not only on how you practice, but also on how you live your life.

— BRAHMANI HOLLY LIEBMAN

People come to yoga for different reasons. Most are looking for a way to improve their health. Others are interested in effective tools to manage stress. Still others seek personal and spiritual growth. Kripalu Yoga offers all these things. It's a practice that revitalizes the body, calms the mind, and deepens self-awareness.

Kripalu Yoga works its magic by bringing body, mind, and spirit into a state of harmony and balance. Focusing on the sensations that arise as you breathe and move bridges the chasm separating body and mind, allowing you to become fully present in your body. A balanced sequence of yoga postures stretches and strengthens the entire body, releasing the chronic tension that so often dulls vitality. As you conclude your yoga session with deep relaxation, energy naturally flows to the areas of your body most in need of rejuvenation and healing. You leave feeling balanced, energized to resume your life, and naturally motivated to sustain your practice.

Regular practice takes you to deeper levels, initiating a gradual process of growth and transformation. Concentration deepens, enabling you to observe the inner flow of emotion and thought with heightened awareness. Riding the wave of your moment-to-moment experience, you release trapped emotion by choosing to feel it fully. Witnessing the activity of the mind, you learn to recognize unproductive thinking and let it go. As these obstacles fall away, a joyous clarity emerges. Moments arise where you touch into the core energy underlying body and mind, expanding your sense of self.

Slowly and steadily, your experience on the yoga mat begins to overflow into the rest of your life. In touch with your body, habits fall away and your lifestyle becomes more supportive of health. Aware of deeper feelings and thoughts, your words and actions begin to express more of who you really are and the quality of your relationships deepens. With abundant energy at your disposal, life's challenges occur as opportunities for growth. On all levels, you feel more vital and fully alive. This is the experience of Kripalu Yoga.

Kripalu Yoga initiated a course of profound change in me. It connected me to my body in ways I had never experienced before. Through Kripalu Yoga, I have found gentleness, spaciousness, and a way to express who I really am.

— Marcia Reass

Kripalu Yoga is a contemporary approach to yoga practice designed for mainstream people leading active lives. Brought to America in the 1960s, the roots of Kripalu Yoga reach back thousands of years into an ancient and authentic yoga tradition. Over the last thirty years, Kripalu Yoga has been assimilated into Western culture by a large and diverse community of North American practitioners and teachers. The result is a potent spiritual practice free of unnecessary cultural trappings and dogmatic lifestyle restrictions, a yoga approach especially suited to our time and place.

Anyone can do Kripalu Yoga—it certainly isn't limited to those with a flexible or trim body. Nor does it require the adoption of any religious beliefs, as people of all faiths practice Kripalu Yoga. The theory and techniques of Kripalu Yoga can be explained in English, so you won't be faced with learning a large number of Sanskrit terms. Although the English names of yoga postures are used throughout the text, the traditional names are also listed to make it easy to cross-reference to other approaches that rely on Sanskrit.

For thousands of years, yoga has recommended a natural and wholesome lifestyle supportive of health. Building on this solid base, Kripalu Yoga integrates principles of holistic health, preventive medicine, and medical research into the traditional yoga lifestyle, augmenting age-old wisdom with contemporary health science.

Kripalu Yoga is not based on the guru/disciple relationship, a paradigm that has proved problematic in so many spiritual communities across America. In its place is an experiential model of education that empowers the learner to discover what is true based on his or her own direct experience. Yoga's traditional emphasis on transcending the ego to attain a otherworldly enlightenment has been balanced with a developmental perspective drawn from Western psychology. The result is an approach that facilitates psychological growth without negating the potential for deeper levels of spiritual awakening.

Although a group class is a great way to jump-start a practice, Kripalu Yoga can be learned in the comfort and privacy of your own home, and requires nothing more than some loose-fitting clothing and a little floor space. Perhaps best of all, Kripalu Yoga doesn't demand an excessive time commitment to bestow its gifts. This book recommends a regular practice of thirty minutes to an hour. Even a daily ten-minute dose of deep breathing and relaxation can make a real difference in your life.

While its form has evolved, Kripalu Yoga still conveys the authentic spirit of yoga and does so in a commonsense practice accessible to everyone. You don't need the body of an athlete or the mind of a mystic, or the lifestyle of a monk to benefit from Kripalu Yoga. Yet if you practice consistently, you will not only nurture your health but also experience the unity of body, mind, and spirit that lies at the heart of all mystical traditions.

I only recently discovered Kripalu Yoga, having practiced Bikram, Ashtanga, Jivamukti, and Anusara yoga before. While each approach has its place, I found that Kripalu Yoga speaks directly to the heart, and then flows out to work with the body. The other forms start with the body and then extend to the heart. This is a powerful twist. With Kripalu Yoga, there is an immediate acceptance of individuality, and an inherent permission to move the body as guided from within. With this approach, truly big things can happen on the mat.

— Kim Ellner

What Distinguishes Kripalu Yoga?

Although yoga traditions vary widely in their approaches, most teach the same basic yoga postures. Here are the attributes unique to Kripalu Yoga.

- **Practice begins gently with an emphasis on being present in your body, sustaining a flowing breath, and warming up.** The overall experience is one of learning to love and nurture your body, not whip it into shape.
- **It allows you to choose the level of physical intensity right for your body.** Instead of encouraging you to judge your performance today against yesterday, or compare your stretch with that of your classmate's, Kripalu Yoga teaches you how to listen to your body and honor its needs. On some days this may lead you to challenge yourself physically to work the kinks out. On others you may move more gently to relax the body and soothe the mind.
- **It recognizes that every body is different.** The goal of Kripalu Yoga is not to perfect the external form of the postures. It views postures as tools to release chronic tension, stretch and strengthen the body, and increase self-awareness. Rather than forcing the body into the classic form of the posture prematurely, postures are modified to meet individual needs.
- **It activates the life force of the body that yoga calls *prana*.** Kripalu Yoga teaches that the body is animated by an energetic life force intimately tied to the breath. Rhythmic breathing charges the system with energy. A balanced sequence of yoga postures encourages it to flow freely and evenly to all parts of the body. As practice deepens, the life force becomes more active and can be felt as warmth, tingling, and currents of energy.
- **It encourages you to create a lifestyle supportive of your health by listening to your own body.** As you practice Kripalu Yoga, you become more sensitive to the needs of your body and are naturally drawn to make healthier choices about diet, exercise, and other lifestyle habits. Kripalu Yoga considers each person's body the ultimate authority on what promotes health and teaches you how to access this *body wisdom* to live with more vitality.
- **It's a yoga you can practice "off the mat."** Being alive is a richer experience when you are connected to your body and breath. Through Kripalu Yoga, you discover that the same principles that bring out the best in you on the yoga mat can be applied to daily life. You learn how to meet challenges with a sense of relaxation, self-acceptance, strength, courage, and openness to change.
- **It offers practical tools to foster psychological and spiritual growth.** By teaching you how to fully feel strong emotion and compassionately observe the activity of the mind, Kripalu Yoga fosters emotional healing and facilitates psychological growth. As a result, your ability to express yourself, listen to others, and be in relationship deepens. Kripalu Yoga also includes sensible spiritual teachings that demystify the process of spiritual awakening and

make it accessible to contemporary people living active lives.

• **It acknowledges that regular yoga practice is designed to initiate a process of personal transformation.** By nurturing the body, opening the heart, and clearing the mind, Kripalu Yoga removes the obstacles that so often stifle and stunt the natural progression of human development. Regular practice stimulates an ongoing process of positive change that inspires you to realize your full potential.

Kripalu Yoga has brought me the skills I need to be fully alive in my life's journey.

—Karen Bentrup

Three Stages of Kripalu Yoga

Kripalu Yoga is taught in three stages that help you safely start and progressively deepen your practice. An overview of the stages appears below. As you make your way through the book, each stage is addressed in detail.

Stage One: Body and Breath Awareness

In the first stage of Kripalu Yoga, you learn how to bring yourself fully present in your body and practice the classic yoga postures with a flowing breath, proper alignment, and a mental focus on sensation. The purpose of stage one practice is to stretch and strengthen your entire body, releasing the chronic muscle tension that inhibits relaxation and underlies many health problems. During the process of stretching and strengthening the body, it is common to encounter physical limitations and emotional blocks. An attitude of compassionate self-acceptance is stressed as an essential element of practice. Each session concludes with the rejuvenating experience of deep relaxation. Regular practice revitalizes the respiratory, nervous, endocrine, digestive, and other major systems of the body that support healthy functioning.

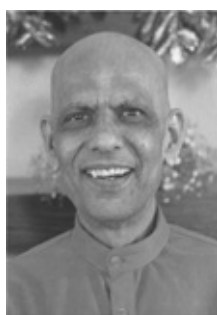
A WORD ABOUT KRIPALU ...

K*ripalu* (Krih-PAH-loo) means *being compassionate* in Sanskrit, the language of the yoga tradition. Both Kripalu Yoga and Kripalu Center were named in honor of Swami Kripalu, a yoga master renowned in India for the depth of his compassion and the intensity of his spiritual practice.

The teachings of Swami Kripalu were first brought to America in the 1960s by one of his close disciples, Yogi Amrit Desai. A powerful 1970 yoga experience led Yogi Desai to adapt the teachings of Swami Kripalu into a format suited to Western students that he

called *Kripalu yoga*. Yogi Desai founded Kripalu Center in 1974 and attracted a loyal following of American students. Through their dedicated efforts, Kripalu Yoga evolved into a popular and effective approach to yoga practice and Kripalu Center quickly grew into the largest yoga and holistic health center in North America, a distinction it has held for more than twenty years.

Swami Kripalu came to America in 1977 and spent his last four years in residence at Kripalu Center, where he continued his life of intensive spiritual practice, scriptural study, and devotional music until shortly before his death in 1981. Swami Kripalu's teachings on yoga practice and supportive lifestyle still form the basis of the Kripalu Yoga approach.



Swami Kripalu
1913-1981

Stage Two: Focusing Inward

In the second stage of Kripalu Yoga, you learn how to encounter and release deep-seated emotional and mental tensions. The purpose of stage two practice is to open the heart and clear the mind. Postures are held for longer periods of time, and the mind is focused on the intensified flow of sensation, emotion, and thought that results. Holding a posture not only strengthens the physical body, it heightens self-awareness and naturally produces meditative states of introversion and introspection. Prolonged holding causes buried emotion and other unconscious material to surface, where it can be felt, seen, and let go. Regular practice restores emotional balance and mental clarity, increasing your capacities for learning and growth.

Stage Three: Meditation-in-Motion

A hallmark of Kripalu Yoga is an experience called *Meditation-in-Motion*. With the mind

deeply relaxed, you allow the body to move spontaneously as guided from within. Entering this experience, you drop everything learned from external sources and respond directly to the urges and intuitive prompting of the body. Stage three is a form of moving meditation that reveals the essential mystical truth: Spirit dwells within you as the intelligent energy underlying body and mind. Kripalu Yoga's approach to meditation is unique, because it recognizes that the essence of meditation is a state of deep inner absorption that can occur either the flow of yoga postures or in moments of physical stillness.

As I practice Kripalu Yoga, I am consistently reminded that I am traveling on a spiritual path. This is a path with heart for me. I feel it. I know it when I'm on it. My heart and gut, my soul if you will, feel good about it. Kripalu Yoga allows me to experience life rather than think and talk about it.

— Dean Fulco

Getting Started

The benefits of yoga come from practice, and this book is designed to get you on the mat as quickly as possible.

- *Part One* presents Kripalu Yoga's techniques of *Body and Breath Awareness*, featuring a series of guided experiences that teach you the essentials of practice in a step-by-step fashion. These experiences distill the basic principles of yoga into simple formats you can revisit again and again as your practice advances.
- *Part Two* presents the *Sun Series* and *Moon Series*, two balanced yoga sessions suitable for daily practice. Taken together, Sun and Moon Series will teach you the classic yoga postures taught in almost all yoga traditions.
- *Part Three* details the amazing *health benefits of yoga* in a way that will inform your practice, making it more supportive of health and healing. It includes practical guidance for overcoming physical challenges and creating a lifestyle based on the wisdom of your own body.
- *Part Four* presents the awareness-focusing and energy-awakening techniques that make Kripalu Yoga a potent and powerful catalyst for *psychological growth and spiritual awakening*. One of the key attributes of Kripalu Yoga is that it skillfully integrates yoga philosophy with growth psychology, and everything you need to deepen your practice is here.
- *Part Five* provides a broad menu of additional warm-ups, postures, and exercises that help you *Evolve Your Practice*, allowing you to make steady gains in strength and flexibility while keeping your experience perpetually fresh and satisfying. If you master the techniques presented here, you will be prepared to learn even the most difficult poses safely and effectively.

The only way to successfully embark on anything new is to *start where you are right now*.
None of us are perfect. Most of us aren't even close! Learning happens best when we can
relax and accept ourselves, whatever our level of flexibility, whatever our state of mind.
Then we are ready to explore, celebrating each step of the path toward greater health and
wholeness as a journey of self-discovery. All of us share a deep longing to realize our
potential for full aliveness. May this book be a helpful step on your journey.



1. BODY AND BREATH AWARENESS



THE PRACTICE OF BEING PRESENT



Yesterday is dead.

Tomorrow isn't born.

We can only live in the present.

— YOGI AMRIT DESAI

The essence of Kripalu Yoga is not a posture, a breathing exercise, or even a meditative technique. It is learning how to be fully present in the moment-by-moment experience of being alive. In the beginning stages of practice, Kripalu Yoga uses a combination of yoga postures and breath awareness to teach you how to bring yourself *fully present in your body*. As practice deepens, this ability to be present becomes a tangible force, transforming the techniques of yoga into powerful tools to cultivate health, facilitate psychological growth, and awaken higher potentials.

Beyond teaching you how to stretch and strengthen, Kripalu Yoga is an approach in which you learn about yourself by being present to the sensations, emotions, and thoughts that are constantly flowing through you. This type of experiential learning awakens your innate knowledge of what is good for you. It empowers you to experiment and learn from the results, leaving you more self-aware and also more empathic of others. At first on the yoga mat, and then in all areas of your life, Kripalu Yoga teaches you how to learn from your own direct experience of being alive.

Ten Feet by Ten Feet

Swami Kripalu used to tell the following story: There once was a traveler on a long and pressing journey. Night fell, and he lost his way in the dark of a thick forest. On the verge of despair, he saw a light flickering in the distance. Making his way toward the light, he found a hut in a small clearing. When he knocked at the door, an old yogi answered and said, "What is it, my friend?" "I've lost my way," said the traveler, "it is a moonless night and the path I am following is hard to see." "Come in and pass the night with me. Although my hut is humble, it is warm and I have food to share," answered the yogi. "Thank you," said the traveler, "but I must arrive at my destination by morning. Can you help me?" The yogi went into his hut momentarily and came back to the door smiling. "I cannot go with you, but take this lantern. It will illumine your way" Looking forlorn, the traveler held the lantern aloft and said, "But I cannot find my way with this lantern. Its light shines only ten feet ahead, and I have a journey of many miles to complete." The yogi replied, "Walk ten feet, and you will be able to see another ten. And when you have walked ten more feet, yet another ten will be

illuminated. So ten feet by ten feet, you will reach your destination.”

Swami Kripalu taught that each of us is a pilgrim, a traveler on a spiritual journey that must be completed in the short span of a lifetime. Along the way, it is inevitable that we will lose our way and encounter moments of despair and confusion. Ultimately no one can complete the journey for us, or even provide shelter from its hardships and rigors. The most anyone can do is to offer a lantern, an aid to walking step by step from the known of the past into the unknown of the future.

The Practice of Being Present

On the journey of Kripalu Yoga, the practice of being present is your lantern, a core technique you can always come back to when you have lost your way, a practice you can rely on in times of challenge. It consists of the following steps:

- **Breathe** Let your breath flow freely in and out.
- **Relax** Soften your muscles, let go of mental tension.
- **Feel** Open to the sensations and emotions moving through you in this moment.
- **Watch** Observe your experience closely, neither grasping what is pleasant nor pushing away what is painful.
- **Allow** Accept yourself and your experience exactly as it is, dropping the need to change in any way.

Bringing yourself present is easy. Over time it becomes second nature. Come into a comfortable sitting posture and give it a try right now.

AN EXPERIENCE OF BEING PRESENT

1. *How freely can you breathe right now?* For a minute or two, focus your attention on the flow of breath in and out of your body. Notice all the sensations connected to the breathing process. Then begin to take long and slow breaths, inhaling all the way down to the belly and fully filling the lungs. Exhale completely by gently squeezing the abdominal muscles toward the end of exhalation. After several deep breaths, release any conscious control and let the breath now freely and naturally. Do not try to breathe deeply, just sustain a flowing breath and let the belly soften with each exhalation.

2. *How could you relax just a little more right now?* Scan your body for areas of tension and consciously soften your muscles. Relaxation does not mean going limp or slouching against the back of your chair. Relaxation is using a minimum of muscular effort to maintain an erect and balanced posture. When you have relaxed your body, soften the

“muscle of the mind” and let go of any tension surrounding your mental activity.

3. *What are you feeling right now?* Let your awareness drop from the head into the body, permeating every cell. Feel all the sensations flowing through you in this moment. This may include internal sensations as well as those of your environment—the air touching your skin and the sounds around you. Open yourself to feel everything that is present in your experience, letting it arise and pass through you in its own time.

4. *What are you aware of right now?* Watch the thoughts, memories, and associations moving across the surface of your mind. Resist any tendency to grasp on to what is pleasant or push away what is painful. Be the silent witness, attending to all the details of your inner experience without getting lost in any train of thought. As the mind comes into greater focus, notice if the quality of your experience changes in any way.

5. *Can you allow the moment to be exactly as it is?* Just for a moment, imagine that you do not have to change anything at all about your experience in order to be happy or content. Rather than trying to make something happen, observe and feel what is naturally happening without any effort on your part. Instead of trying to understand your experience, be fully present as the experience unfolds moment to moment. Allow this moment—and yourself—to be perfect just the way it is.

Simple and Profound

The practice of being present is deceptively simple. Don't discount its potency just because it appears easy to do. Being present brings your mind and body together, creating an inner state of receptivity and focus. This receptivity acts like a magnifying glass, raising your awareness of feelings and thoughts. As you attend to whatever is present by choosing to feel it fully and see it clearly, it becomes free to pass through you. Insights naturally arise in the relaxed and spacious awareness that results, leaving you perpetually fresh to the next moment.

Learning how to be present is a somewhat paradoxical process. It begins with compassionate self-acceptance, yet it leads to the ability to act dynamically in the face of inertia and fear. A particularly common obstacle that blocks us from being present is *self-judgment*, often reflected in a critical inner voice that constantly sees ourselves as *not enough* and may tend to blame others as well. Because self-acceptance soothes and gradually quiets this inner critic, it is an essential starting place for anyone wanting to dive deeper into the here-now experience of life. But the practice of being present doesn't stop with self-acceptance. When the time is right, it encourages you to step beyond your comfort zone and challenge yourself in healthy ways. Breaking free of habits and fears that draw their power from past conditioning, you can explore new experiences that strengthen your body and

mind.

Simple yet profound, the ability to bring yourself fully present is one of life's true secrets. Grounded in the body, taking good care of your health becomes a matter of listening to the urges and feelings that give voice to its needs. With your mind focused on what is happening here and now, you can respond to life directly, free of past baggage and worries about the future. Being present empowers you to make conscious choices about what you want—and don't want—to create in your life. When you are present in your body, you live with natural ease and grace.

CENTERING



*Here. Right here, right now
bring your mind to this place
and time. Invite it, even if it
resists, to sit and witness
what it is to be alive. Let
there be no ulterior motive
in this moment but to be.*

*Rest on the waves of breath
and choose to experience
all of it. Let thoughts float
through and leave again, as
the mind slowly settles like
snow inside a shaken
paperweight.*

*This is all there is. Here.
Right here and now.*

I was in the middle of a Kripalu Yoga class in 1999. The teacher led us into a seated forward bend, giving us alignment and breathing direction. He then said, "Don't abandon your body." Well, I looked down at my leg and realized that I'd been estranged from my body for most of my life. I thought, "Who are you? What are you? How are you?" At that moment, I knew that my body had been waiting all these years for my attention and love. It was the beginning of my healing journey, and of what has proved to be a continually amazing relationship of respect for my body.

— Kim Childs

Being Present On the Yoga Mat

You may be amazed at the rich mix of sensations, emotions, and thoughts you encounter on the yoga mat. When you become present to this inner flow, you discover that body and mind naturally gravitate toward a healthy state of balance. Feeling sensation, tensions release and the body begins to heal. Being with the rise and fall of emotion, defenses drop away and

emotional balance is restored. Observing the flow of thought, distractions fade and the mind calms. Kripalu Yoga teaches that underlying sensation, emotion, and thought is the flow of life force called *prana* that can be felt as tingling currents of energy. When you attune to this energy, all these levels of your being naturally come into harmony. Over the course of a yoga session, you use the techniques of yoga to come back in touch with yourself and rest there present and relaxed.

For many years, I have pushed aside the conference tables of our Boston law firm to teach yoga to CFOs, venture capitalists, and other busy professionals. One time a leading corporate lawyer who had worked in the same high-rise for over twenty years came up to me after class and said, "I never thought I could feel so relaxed and at peace in this building." It was a beautiful moment, and I also know he was learning a major lesson. A big part of the quality of our life experience is determined by how present we are, and not by our outer circumstances.

— Justin Morreale

Being Present Off the Yoga Mat

Yoga practice is just that—practice. The fruit of practice is being more present in your life. The next time you find yourself stuck in traffic and feel your blood pressure rising, apply the principles of breathe, relax, feel, watch, and allow. Turn an unavoidable inconvenience into an opportunity to relax and center yourself. While selecting items from a salad bar or menu, bring yourself present. In touch with your body's needs, and awake to all the sights and smells, you can make the best possible food choices.



When I first started taking Kripalu Yoga classes, I thought it was exercise, nothing more. Having struggled with body image and weight issues all my life, it was daunting to be in classes with people in much better physical shape than myself. I spoke to my teacher, insisting I didn't belong in the class. Thankfully, he didn't agree.

Two weeks into yoga, I was aching and frustrated. Gradually I began to be present and listen to my body. I had what I'd call my first transformation. I saw myself for a fleeting moment, as perfect just the way I was. This was astonishing. My physical body began to open up and I could breathe and stretch farther. I found I could "just be," a phrase I'd heard my teacher say over and over. It started to make sense to me, and I had moments of serenity.

Several months later, I had an incredible breakthrough in class. With no expectations, and no fears, I continually asked my body and soul, "Does this feel right? Is this what I need to do in this moment?" I knew absolutely that if I kept breathing during certain postures, I could go deeper and not feel pain. I stopped judging myself. And then, most amazing of all for me, I opened my eyes and looked at the other students in the class. For the first time I didn't see them versus me. I saw individuality on each mat. I saw the beauty in being different and unique. I began to do each posture exactly the way my body wanted. I began to feel joyful in class.

I feel as if I've given birth to a new way of being in the world. My yoga teacher taught me that by continuing to practice, day after day, things open up. At first, I wondered if I belonged in that yoga class. Now I know that yoga belongs in me, and that it will continue to be my way of moving toward greater truth, clarity, presence, and serenity in my life.



As your practice deepens, experiment with remaining present in the face of strong emotion. Watch what arises in your mind during a frustrating moment at work, or after a heated exchange with a family member. Closely observing your inner experience in moments of challenge reveals volumes about yourself. When you are present in moments like these, life itself becomes your teacher. Connected to your body, attuned to your emotions, aware of your thoughts, you let the moment-by-moment experience of life touch, teach, and transform you.

I used to spend most of my waking hours planning the next day, week, or month. Although I was driven and passionate about life, I was never satisfied with myself or my family. I read self-help books and listened to tapes, but something was missing. Then Kripalu Yoga taught me how to breathe into life, feel its wonder, and watch it unfold with all its power and miracles. As a result, my relationship with my husband and daughter has deepened. I honestly love myself the work I perform, and the people I reach out and touch. Kripalu Yoga has given me a new lease on life.

— Barbara Templeton

Being Present Versus Being Perfect

Kripalu Yoga is not about attaining any form of external perfection. It is not about developing the perfect body, doing perfect yoga postures, or living the perfect yoga lifestyle. Kripalu Yoga is a way to be fully present to the reality of life unfolding in the moment—however it is showing up. Rather than teaching you how to get somewhere else, it helps you be fully where you are.

As you practice being present on and off the yoga mat, you learn what is for many a startling lesson. Life does not require us to be perfect. You are okay, just as you are, right now. Paradoxically, it is just this type of self-acceptance that opens the door to moments in which you glimpse the divine perfection inherent in a constantly changing and always “imperfect” life. In the sweepstakes of life, you must be present to win.

BREATHING LIFE INTO YOUR PRACTICE



Practicing yoga postures with deep sensitivity to the breath is ten times more beneficial than postures done without breath awareness.

— SWAMI KRIPALU

Physicians refer to a person's ability to move air in and out of the lungs as their *vital capacity*. The teachings of yoga heartily agree with the idea this term conveys: there is a direct correlation between the ability to breathe freely and your overall state of health and happiness. The importance of the breath can be seen from what happens when it is taken away. We can survive for weeks without food, days without water, but perish in minutes without oxygen. Yoga teaches that the converse of this idea is also true. Nurtured by a free-flowing breath, your whole being quickly blossoms into full aliveness.

Breathing is so important because every cell of the body requires a constant supply of oxygen for the energy-generating process of metabolism to proceed properly. At the cellular level, the process of taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide is called *cellular respiration*, a process intimately tied to the absorption of nutrients, the elimination of waste, and the oxidation of fuel into energy. Sustaining a free-flowing breath for the duration of a yoga session stimulates cellular respiration and increases metabolism throughout the body, uplifting the health of each and every cell.

Deep, rhythmic breathing is the king of all exercises. Under conditions of heightened respiration, the heart, arteries, capillaries, veins, and lungs perform many days' labor in only a few hours. As blood circulation increases, basic nutrients are distributed to all the tissues in the body. Waste products accumulating in the cells are eliminated into the veins. Indeed, one can comprehend the significance of all forms of exercise by understanding this process alone. The body parts are moved merely to churn and stimulate the respiratory process.

— Swami Kripalu

The breath is also intimately tied to the mind and emotions. When the mind is agitated by anger or fear, the breath grows rapid, shallow, and irregular. When the mind is calm and focused, the breath flows slowly and smoothly. Understanding this relationship of breath and mental state is a key component of yoga practice because it works both ways. By regulating the flow and quality of the breath, the emotions can be brought into balance and the mind made calm and clear.

It seems counterintuitive that anyone would need to learn to do something as natural as breathing freely and deeply. Why do we restrict our breathing? One answer is that tightening the belly muscles is a natural short-term response to stress that dulls our ability to feel and

protects us physically and emotionally. If this response becomes habitual, it creates a host of undesirable consequences. Through the practice of being present and breath awareness, Kripalu Yoga returns us to full feeling and releases chronic muscular and emotional tension. Unless practiced with sensitivity to the breath, yoga postures fall far short of their potential to foster healing and growth.

PRANA, THE LIFE FORCE

The yogis of ancient India perceived in meditation that the physical body is animated by a flow of life force intimately connected to the breath. They named this force *prana* and carefully mapped its flow through a network of pathways called the *subtle body*, which closely resembles the nervous system. Rhythmic breathing or *pranayama* acts like a pump to charge the system with life force. Postures encourage its flow through body and mind. When prana flows freely, health and well-being naturally result. Yogi Amrit Desai, the originator of Kripalu Yoga, was one of the first Indian yogis to bring a comprehensive set of teachings on prana to America.



The first time I walked into a Kripalu Yoga class, I was used to feeling edgy and hard. We started in Corpse Pose and moved into some gentle warm-ups, encouraged to keep the gaze soft and feel sensation. When the teacher directed us to focus on the breath, suddenly things started changing. In all my pushing and striving, I had forgotten the breath! I began to feel the breath moving through my body, beyond my lungs. My hardness softened just a little, and I retracted my pointy edges. Not only was that okay, it was a relief. I knew then the battle I had been living was of my own making, and I didn't have to keep fighting.

— Jennifer Cann

Breathing Deeply

Most people have become accustomed to a breath pattern that limits their vital capacity. They are *chest breathers*, taking rapid and shallow breaths, often through the mouth, with lift of the shoulders and minimal use of the diaphragm and blood-rich lower lungs. Or they are *belly breathers*, breathing more slowly and deeply but prone to have a rigid and inflexible

chest due to minimal use of the intercostal muscles that expand chest capacity and inflate the upper lungs.

While breathing habits do not change overnight, the body has the innate capacity—and hunger—to breathe deeply. The practice of Kripalu Yoga is designed to gently but steadily remove the obstacles that prevent you from breathing freely and deeply. It works in two ways to expand your vital capacity. It strengthens the abdominal muscles, diaphragm, and intercostal muscles to make full use of the lungs. It also releases physical tensions and emotional blocks that often inhibit deep breathing.



*I breathe in All That Is—
Awareness expanding
to take everything in,
as if my heart beats
the world into being.*

*From the unnamed
vastness beneath the
mind, I breathe my
way to wholeness
and healing.*

*Inhalation. Exhalation.
Each breath a “yes,”
and a letting go,
a journey, and a
coming home.*

EXPERIENCE: BREATHING FREELY

The ability to let the breath flow is learned through the technique of *Ocean Sounding Breath*, traditionally called *Ujjayi Pranayama*. The word *ujjayi* means *great* or *victorious sound*. Ocean Sounding Breath relaxes the body, calms the mind, and increases the flow of energy through the nervous system. You may sit in a chair, as in the instructions below, or comfortably on the floor.

1. Sit near the front edge of a chair. Adjust the feet so they are hip-width apart and parallel. Rest the hands palms up on the thighs. Elongate the spine by pressing the sitz bones down and extending through the crown of the head. Bring the chin parallel to the floor. Resist any tendency to lean against the chair back, which rounds the spine,

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