

Bridging the paths with Kripalu Yoga

by Pierre Bélisle

Yogic Tradition

In previous articles (Tone, October 2004 and March 2005) we saw that, in the Indian yogic tradition, you were either a householder having social or worldly obligations and you practiced the path of social action (*Pravritti*) or you had renounced it all to live in a monastery or a cave on the path of renunciation (*Nivritti*). These paths were strictly sequential and had different yoga practices. This article will summarize the two paths and then show how Kripalu yoga can be used to follow these paths in parallel.

Pravritti Path

The objective of the *Pravritti* path was to release physical and mental tensions, to weed out false concepts about yourself and to build a strong sense of self, a strong container (*Ahankara*) so that you could be effective in the world. This was done by focussing on the first three limbs of yoga according to Patanjali: the Abstentions (*Yamas*), the Practices (*Nyamas*) and the yoga postures (*Asanas*).

Nivritti Path

Having built a strong container of unified Mind, Body and Spirit and achieved worldly success, some people would then embark on the *Nivritti* path. They would renounce the world to focus on dissolving that strong container (*Ahankara*). Their goal was to free themselves of all conditioning, connect with their True Self and achieve liberation (*Moksha*). The focus of this path is mostly on the last 5 limbs of yoga: Life Force control (*Pranayama*), Withdrawing inwards (*Pratyahara*), Concentration (*Dharana*), Meditation (*Dhyana*), leading to Cosmic union (*Samadhi*).

Bridging the Paths

Traditionally, these two paths were done strictly sequentially. Householders needed to be on the *Pravritti* path for at least 12 years before even thinking of embarking on the *Nivritti* path: anything else would be considered “premature transcendence”.

The Kripalu Approach

Kripalu yoga is an approach to hatha yoga that can bridge the two paths by purposely addressing all 8 limbs of yoga right from the start. It is inspired by the life and teachings of Swami Kripalvanandji (1913 – 1981). Using the guiding principles of Breathe, Relax, Feel, Watch and Allow, the practice of **Kripalu Yoga** is an invitation into moment-to-moment meditative awareness to integrate body, mind and spirit and to connect with your powerful True Self.

In **Kripalu Yoga** the physical postures are considered to be the external vehicle of the more significant “internal posture” that we want to develop (both on the mat and off the mat): inner stillness, equanimity, harmony and peace. Eventually, this inner state remains constant even though the outer postures (and life situations) keep changing. In Kripalu yoga, our experiences on the yoga mat are seen as preparation for dealing effectively with the challenges of a householder’s life with the equanimity of a renunciate monk (*to be in the world but not of it*).

Practice in Stages

The practice of **Kripalu Yoga** consists of three sequential stages that may be combined in different proportions in any given yoga set (see below).

Stage 1: Wilful practice - Classic hatha yoga postures are done with relaxation, deep breathing and proper alignment. An attitude of self-acceptance and non-violence is stressed as the essential element of this practice along with focusing the awareness on the flow of breath, on the details of alignment and on the body sensations. This practice already encompasses the first five limbs of yoga:

- *Yamas* and *Nyamas* are evoked to instill proper attitudes (on and off the mat);
- Postures (*Asanas*) are used to strengthen the body and release chronic tensions;
- A variety of breathing exercises are introduced to start building and directing Life Force energy (*Pranayama*).
- Attention is constantly drawn inwards to the “inner experience” of the postures (*Prathyahara*); and
- You are invited to concentrate on the sensations in the body and on subtle alignment details (*Dharana*).

In **Stage 2: Wilful surrender** – Here, you become attuned to the presence and flow of the intelligent life force (*prana*) that guides the functioning of the body and mind. Wilfulness is used to hold postures longer and to keep the mind focused on the sensations and thoughts that arise during holding. At the same time, the body is invited to surrender to inner guidance and to respond to sensations with slow spontaneous micro-movements. Witness consciousness is used to closely observe the interplay of body and mind. As *prana* grows stronger and the ability of the mind to witness its own activity increases, practitioners enter a meditative state (*Dhyana*).

In **Stage 3: Surrender** – Here, the mind remains still while surrendering the body to the guidance of *prana*, letting energy flow freely and allowing the body to respond with spontaneous movements or postures, essentially becoming one with the posture and surrendering to something much bigger than ourselves to guide us into what is appropriate moment to moment (*Samadhi*).

Combining the Stages

Kripalu yoga teachers and practitioners can combine these three stages in different proportions in a yoga set depending on experience levels and on the effect that they wish to achieve.

1. For people that are new to yoga or for those wanting a more grounding practice there would be much more emphasis on wilfulness practices (Stage 1) with some hints of surrender practices (Stage 2).
2. For those with some yoga experience wishing to go deeper, wilful Stage 1 practices would be combined with lots of opportunities to focus inwards and to surrender to innate wisdom with micro-movements (Stage 2).
3. More seasoned practitioners wishing to connect with the True Self would use Stage 1 and Stage 2 practices to build the strong focus and energy that will induce deeper surrender and be the seed for spontaneous posture flows and Cosmic union (Stage 3).

Where to find Kripalu Yoga

To find Kripalu yoga teachers in your area, see the Tone Directory listings or use the Kripalu web site: www.kripalu.org. While on the Kripalu web site, check out all the great workshop offerings that are coming up this Spring and Summer.

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