

The Power and Depth of Kripalu Yoga

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As a senior teacher at Kripalu Center and head of our Advanced Yoga Teacher Training program, I have spent the last three years developing programs to educate our Yoga teachers about the history and philosophy of your tradition.

My research into the teachings of the masters of our path, the texts they wrote or endorsed, the historical facts associated with their lives and activities, as well as my own practice of their techniques and rituals, have given me a new perspective on the path that has changed my understanding of Kripalu Yoga. I am sharing my insights to spread my enthusiasm and insights to other travelers of the Kripalu path, and to practitioners of other traditions, because I believe many older traditions were similar in structure and philosophy.

As I look at the rich history and depth that Kripalu Yoga has evolved from, I see that much has been lost or diminished through time and the many transitions through eras, languages, cultures and personalities. In looking deeply at where we have come from I find much that can enrich our modern practice of Kripalu Yoga. I find a rich heritage, a profound philosophy, and very powerful transformational techniques.

My hope in writing is to integrate three parts of our tradition that I have never seen satisfactorily merged. In their coming together these parts reveal, not only the depth and power of our tradition, but possibly the depth and power of a universal Yoga path. I will present evidence that all or most established Yoga traditions may have evolved from one ancient Yoga school, and that each currently holds a piece of it's original philosophy and practice.

To see where we have come from, three pieces need to be understood and integrated. They are: the ancient Yoga tradition called Pashupata Marga, Swami Kripalu's teachings and writings, and Kripalu Yoga, as it was developed by Amrit Desai, and as it is currently being taught by Kripalu teachers. My resources and perspective on each are as follows:

Pashupata Marga

The available information on the Pashupata Sect is primarily the scholarly writings of historians with some philosophical commentary, and the actual writings that have survived from the Pashupata school.

Swami Kripalu

Most of Swami Kripalu's writings are currently out of print and are not well known in the Kripalu community. Many were never published in English, though several texts have been translated unofficially by students. Swami Kripalu was deeply immersed in his Yoga practice and had full confidence in it. He firmly believed he was uncovering in his practice the original path of Yoga, and that this path was taught in all the true texts. With the conviction of personal experience, he has interpreted many passages from well-

known Yoga texts in non-conventional ways. It is my hope to draw from his experience and understanding without putting him in the position of being an absolute authority.

Amrit Desai and Kripalu Yoga

As a resident of Kripalu Ashram for fifteen years, and a close disciple of Amrit Desai, I have in-depth experience in the evolution and practice of Kripalu Yoga. The perspective I am writing from is as follows.

Amrit had a love for Yoga, but very little formal training. He learned asanas from a poster in a gymnasium where he exercised as a boy. Amrit Desai developed Kripalu Yoga initially as a bridge for his western disciples who aspired to the renunciate path Swami Kripalu traveled. Kripalu Yoga gave some of the benefits of deeper practice to householder disciples and, according to Swami Kripalu, provided a good foundation for anyone aspiring to Swami Kripalu's path.¹

In developing Kripalu Yoga, Amrit drew upon what he had been taught by Swami Kripalu and what he had seen of Swami Kripalu's practices in their times together. Swami Kripalu was very secretive about many aspects of his practice, discussing them only with renunciate students. Many topics he considered banned from public discussion, and if he spoke about them at all, he used symbolism or metaphor.

My observations show me that Amrit did not know of many aspects of Swami Kripalu's practice and if he did, he did not teach them. It may be that he chose to focus on what he knew and felt comfortable teaching. Or, his behavior has shown that he chose to avoid some areas of inner growth, perhaps he diminished the aspects of the path that would have led him into these areas.

Swami Kripalu's Path

Swami Kripalu was a very devoted ascetic and yogi who practiced Yoga techniques and rituals ten hours each day. He carried this daily practice for over thirty years. His regimen consisted of primarily Hatha Yoga practices done in a devotional manner.

Swami Kripalu believed, based on his personal experience, that most Yoga techniques described in the Hatha Yoga texts were meant to occur spontaneously, even though they are described as being done willfully. Later I will present his theory on why they were described inaccurately.

Swami Kripalu's experiences with "spontaneous Yoga" began at the age of thirty-eight, when he was undergoing an intense regimen of Pranayama practice. He was doing Anuloma Viloma² Pranayama four and one half hours each day, in three- one and one half hour sittings.

One day in the middle of a Pranayama sitting, he felt himself losing awareness of his body as if he were falling asleep. Suddenly, his body began to move and convulse. It trembled, shook, and his limbs began to flail about. Spontaneous rapid expulsions of

¹ Swami Kripalu's Introduction to the unpublished Kripalu Yoga Book.

² Anuloma Viloma is a pranayama technique that is described in many Hatha Yoga texts. It is prescribed for bodily purification before more active or subtle pranayamas are practiced. Sometimes it is called Nadi Shodhana pranayama- pranayama to purify the nadis (channels).

breath occurred. His body rolled on the floor and began to arch and writhe. Swami Kripalu felt himself to be detached from his body as if he were watching it from a distance. The movements occurred so fast and changed so unexpectedly, that his mind became fully absorbed by what was happening, with no time to analyze or predict what would occur next.

After an extended period of time spent in this manner, Swami Kripalu collapsed into deep relaxation. He awoke after a short time and was very surprised at what had occurred.

He was even more surprised when it happened again in his next Pranayama session. Soon, he was unable to do more than one round of Anuloma Viloma before convulsive movements began.

As the days passed, Swami Kripalu noticed that the movements became more intense and that in different sessions, they seemed to focus on different parts of his body. His first interpretations of these experiences were that something was wrong with his health or sanity. He chose to trust in his teacher's guidance and continue.³

One day Swami Kripalu saw a book on Hatha Yoga and was amazed to see that many of the positions and breathing techniques occurring in his practice were classical Yoga postures and Pranayamas. As he continued his practice, many more experiences emerged that he interpreted as being Shat Kriya, Pratyahar and Dharana techniques.⁴

Swami Kripalu began to collect and study Yoga posture books to learn more about what was occurring in his practice. Sometimes he was surprised to find that he would read a description in a Yoga text and an image of the technique would form in his mind. Days, months, or years later the technique would occur in his spontaneous practice. When the practice occurred, it would be true to the text, but very different from the mental image that had formed. Swami Kripalu taught that, study of texts without practice could not reveal the truth of the texts. Practice provided an understanding, and revealed deeper meanings.

Swami Kripalu received instruction and was initiated into the powerful austerities that led to his energy awakening by an old ascetic he met as a young man. Swami Kripalu believed that this man was an incarnation of a teacher named Lakulisha who had lived about two thousand years ago, and was a well-known teacher in a tradition called Pashupata Marga.

Pashupata Marga

The origins of Pashupata Marga are not known, some historians believe Lakulisha started it, others believe he revived or revealed a tradition that was ancient in his day. There is some evidence that Pashupata symbols and rituals were used in Vedic times.⁵ Also a statuette found in the ancient city of Mohenjo Daro, which have been used to date Yoga

³ Swami Kripalu had studied with his teacher for fifteen months when he was nineteen. This teacher had taught him Yoga philosophy but only one pranayama and one posture, saying that through their practice Swami Kripalu would learn everything there was to know about Yoga. See Prem Yatra 2 pages 110-113.

⁴ These are advanced practices of Hatha Yoga, see HYP Chapter 2, verse 22-23, for Shatkriya and for Pratyahar, Dharana, and dhyana, see Patanjali Yoga Sutra, Chapter 3, verse 54; Chapter 4, verse 1-2

⁵ 2000-3000 b.c.e.

practice back to 2000-4000 b.c.e., contain symbols that were later central to Pashupata iconography.⁶

Most of our knowledge of Pashupata philosophy and practice come from what was written about them by others. There are a few unflattering comments about their appearance and practices in the Mahabharata and the Puranas, texts written after the time of Lakulisha. And groups described in the Vedas, written long before Lakulisha, fit the Pashupata description.

Lakulisha, the man Swami Kripalu believed was his teacher, authored the one existing text that was used by the Pashupatas themselves. It is very cryptic and, consistent with the comments of their contemporaries, describes the Pashupata practitioners as intense ascetics who behaved in ways that caused people to avoid them in order to ensure privacy for their rituals.

The Pashupata Sutra, taken literally, describes the lifestyle and philosophy of the Pashupata cult. It is very likely that much of the text is symbolic or has meaning on both literal and symbolic levels.

Swami Kripalu wrote primarily on the Hatha Yoga practices he received from the man he believed to be Lakulisha, as well as the Hatha Yoga practices that evolved from his energy awakening. In comparing the teachings of Swami Kripalu with the writings of the Pashupata Sutra, I find that they can be interpreted in a way that integrates them very neatly, and I believe together they generate a more accurate picture of the Pashupata school than can be gathered from historical data.

I interpret the instruction Swami Kripalu received from Lakulisha as the internal or “on the mat” teachings of the Pashupat sect, and the instruction given in the Pashupata Sutra as the external practices. There is also the possibility that many of the external rituals described in the Pashupata Sutra are symbolic of internal or meditative experiences.

Lets look at the primary goal of Yoga practice, and then see how Swami Kripalu’s practices and Pashupata Marga led to that goal.

Structure of Ahankara and its dissolution through Yoga practice

Most modern and ancient Yoga philosophies hold the common idea that our eternal soul is trapped in the world of matter and change. The relationship of the soul to God, the nature of the world, and the techniques to obtain freedom, constitute the primary differences between philosophies.

The causal situation is that the soul, by some means, becomes lost. It forgets that it is eternal and does not know what it is. Not knowing produces fear, so the soul seeks out an identity. It looks to the external world to tell it who it is. It seeks permanence and connectedness through accomplishments, relationships and possessions. Once the soul has built an identity, it tries desperately to maintain it. This collection of ideas and things is named ‘Ahankara’, which means ‘self shape’. Yoga is the process of dissolving Ahankara and once again experiencing ourselves as a soul.

⁶ The Yoga Tradition, Georg Feuerstein, the pashupata seal, pages 133-4

We can view this process of identity development very easily by imagining a new-born baby. The child has no idea who it is and quickly accepts any information from its environment to help it form an identity. The love or neglect of the parents, as well as their beliefs and values, are transferred to the child, and are further blended with information gleaned from its failures and successes. The child is considered grown when its sense of self is strong enough to function in the world.

Once the Ahankara is strong, it resists change. We work to create around us an environment that reinforces the things we believe about ourselves, and we push away that which is threatening. The Yogi, wanting the freedom to experience the soul, works to dissolve Ahankara. The dissolving of Ahankara is called Samadhi in many traditions.

Not having an Ahankara would make someone a crazy person. The Yogi wants to temporarily dissolve Ahankara and identify himself as Buddhi, the witnessing soul behind Ahankara, in deep meditation. When the meditation ends, Ahankara reforms, possibly a little different from before under the influence of the experience of Buddhi. The Yogi wants to repeatedly dissolve and reform Ahankara until Ahankara loses its ability to bind. Then one is a Jivan Mukti.⁷

In Patanjali Yoga Sutra, the word ‘Asmita’ is used in the same sense as Ahankara. Asmita is one of the five afflictions and is an integral part of Chitta, which is usually translated as mind stuff. Chitta is made of Buddhi- the field Ahankara evolves in, Ahankara (or Asmita), and mind (Manas)- the protector of Ahankara. When Patanjali says “Yoga is stopping the modifications of the Chitta”,⁸ he can be interpreted as saying that, Yoga is the dissolving of Ahankara and all of its constructs into Buddhi.

All Yoga traditions consist of different technologies to achieve this state. Lets look at the technology Swami Kripalu claims to have inherited from Lakulisha, and then at the technology Lakulisha describes in the Pashupata Sutra.

Ahankara in Swami Kripalu’s spontaneous Sadhana

Swami Kripalu believed that Ahankara exists in an ocean of energy called Prana. If the right conditions could be created, Ahankara could dissolve in Prana.

Swami Kripalu combined extensive Pranayama and long holding of Yoga postures with a very light diet and restrained lifestyle. Over a period of time this generated a physical restlessness that he associated with increased Prana on the biological level.

Normally when Prana gets strong, Ahankara automatically does something to weaken the Prana because strong Prana is threatening to the stability of the Ahankara. An example would be that we have a stressful day. The fight/flight energy or Prana that is activated in our bodies is still active at the end of the day and we feel restless. We will find any activity that drains Prana very attractive at that time, even if it is not healthy, or a choice we would make if we were clear.

⁷ A free soul inhabiting a body.

⁸ Patanjali Yoga Sutra Section 1, verse 2.

The Yogi on Swami Kripalu's path raises his biological energy to an uncomfortable state and then just sits with it. The discomfort generated by the high biological energy disturbs Ahankara, generating disturbed emotions. The Yogi practices watching the disturbance without doing anything about it. In this way he moves from identifying with Ahankara to identifying with Buddhi.

When the Yogi has cultivated a strong witness to the disturbances of Prana, he moves to another stage of practice. In this stage, he generates strong biological energy and then relaxes his control over his body as fully as he can. As the body control is released, spontaneous movements begin. Tensions in the body release and cause shudders and tremors. Sometimes pockets of fear or other emotions release and very vigorous movements will occur. If the Prana becomes strong enough these movements will eventually become Yoga postures and Pranayamas.

These spontaneous movements have a very powerful effect on Ahankara. The awareness is strongly drawn to them and the world outside dissolves. The mind becomes so absorbed in the movements that it stops thinking. For this little bit of time, Ahankara loses all connection and support from the outside world. It experiences itself not as limited Ahankara, but as all that is.

At first this is very frightening. Ahankara struggles to reestablish itself. As the Yogi continues strengthening his Prana through his practices, Ahankara is threatened more and more until eventually it is dissolved in Prana energy.

Ahankara in Pashupata Sadhana

The practitioners of Pashupata Marg also saw the Ahankara as surrounded by energy, only they called the energy Shiva, or any of several names of Shiva. They saw the soul as being bound in Ahankara, and needing to be freed by merging it in Shiva.

To unbind the soul and merge it with Shiva, the Pashupatas used techniques that greatly disturbed Ahankara. First they cultivated a devotional relationship with the energy of Shiva. Then they engaged in practices that caused the energy of Shiva to rise up and dissolve Ahankara. Many of the techniques that raised energy were practices that made the practitioner feel fear. The Pashupatas called fear "Rudra", one of the names of Shiva. Some of these practices were physical austerities like fasting with the condition that you would only eat food if it were offered without asking. Others involved separating the Ahankara from external supports by not wearing clothes or smearing the body with ashes.

Many of the practices involved exhibiting behaviors that would cause other people to not like the pashupatas, or to become angry or even disgusted with them.

The Pashupatas practices invited situations that would make them feel fearful, alone or uncared for. They practiced just observing, letting the intense emotions dissolve Ahankara while they remained established in Buddhi.

By working with Prana generated inside his body by Pranayama and postures, Swami Kripalu brought his Ahankara to a very unstable place. By cultivating his strength as a

witness, he was able to detach himself from the struggling Ahankara and experience himself as Buddhi.

Through cultivating a devotional relationship with Shiva as the force beyond Ahankara, the Pashupata students were able to put themselves in very fearful and painful situations and see the fear or pain as Shiva. In reaching to embrace the fear and pain they stepped away from that which made it fear and pain, Ahankara. They also experienced the identity with Buddhi, only they called it Shiva.

What I have just described is the end result of a very long process, with many stages. A conditioning is required not to run away, to stop the meditation or to believe in Ahankara's defensive maneuvers. The ancient Yogis of all schools recognized that many exercises were needed to strengthen and purify the body, will, and prepare Ahankara to dissolve. This was not an easy process accomplished in a few years; it could be a lifetime endeavor.

The structure of the Pashupata School

The Pashupata sect was a mystery school, whose deeper philosophy could only be understood by one who had prepared through strength building and perception changing austerities. The Pashupata cult was laid out in initiatory layers. Each layer had its own practices, world-view and philosophy. Each layer was designed to prepare the student for the next, and was an integral piece in a complex spiritual technology that led to a state called Rudrasayuja or blissful union with God Shiva.⁹

The Pashupatas had a practice-based philosophy. There was less focus on beliefs and more focus on practice.¹⁰ Studying the teachings of a teacher who had attained a lofty state was not considered the way to achieve that state. To learn the qualities of a realized master and work to limit behavior to the expression of those qualities was considered an imposition and a dead end. In other words, being good was not the goal, being real was. Then from a place of being real, a different type of goodness could be cultivated, a goodness that sprang from 'being' rather than from 'will.'

Since the Pashupata school contained different levels of practice with different goals, it makes sense that the different levels might be contradictory, or at least inconsistent. This was certainly the case. And can be illustrated both on the mat and off.

A student at one level of practice might be given an Asana routine and told to practice it very willfully, holding each posture a specific amount of time and then moving on to the next one without pause.

After practicing for many years the student may have cultivated a strong will (strong Ahankara). He would then be initiated into another level of practice where he is told to hold each Asana for a period of time and then to relax and feel his body, allowing his body to move freely as it rebalances after the holding. In this stage, sequencing periods of free flow between extended holdings, the student cultivates sensitivity. Eventually, he may be taught to hold a few postures for an extended period of time at the beginning of

⁹ The Five Faces of Shiva, Yogeshvar Muni, Introduction

¹⁰ The Yoga Tradition, Georg Feuerstein, The Pashupata tradition, page 344-346

each session and then to enter an extended free-flow of Asanas, letting his body move anyway it wishes with his mind as a passive witness.

In perhaps a final stage of working with Asana, when his energies are fully activated and he has gained the awareness of how those energies move and how not to interfere, he may be given the practice of just sitting down and letting go into whatever energy expression wants to emerge.

Consider an off the mat example of levels of practicing the Yama, Satya.¹¹ At a lower level of practice, a student might be taught to practice Satya by going through his day and restraining himself each time he feels a desire to be less than truthful. This practice may cultivate a trust in truth, and in the student's ability to change and improve the quality of his behavior.

At a deeper level of practice, the student may be taught to practice Satya by noticing each time he feels a desire to lie. When the desire emerges, the student looks deeply into himself and explores why he feels drawn to lie. An example of what might emerge follows.

Imagine you and I are conversing and suddenly I have an urge to exaggerate the truth. I look deeply and see that something you said made me feel inferior. I became defensive and wanted to reestablish my self as equal to, or greater than you. As I restrain my desire to lie, I feel shame and humiliation. As I sit with these feelings I see that who I really am is beyond shame and that I can feel extremely empowered by my ability to experience states of shame without believing that I am bad.

Once again we have different expressions of a practice generating different goals. Often the deeper levels of practice have meaning only because the student has appropriately practiced the lower levels, and has conditioned or strengthened through the lower practices. One needs a high level of inner strength to feel and witness shame rather than jumping to avoid it or diving into self-pity.

Just as practicing easier Asanas prepares one to practice more advanced Asanas by conditioning and strengthening the body, and increasing body awareness and confidence. So also, practices that alter self-perception and perception of the world need to be sequenced to have their full power.

Layered practices in other Schools and texts

I find this layered practice in texts that have been used by various schools. I believe that some confusion has occurred because of layers of practice being interpreted as inconsistency.

Swami Kripalu taught that the Bhagavad Gita was a text consistent with Pashupat Marga and often quoted and taught from it.

¹¹ The Pashupata practitioners used well-known Yamas and Niyamas as well as more shocking restraints and observances.

An example of layered practice appearing as inconsistency, can be found in the Bhagavad Gita's teachings on anger. The Bhagavad Gita teaches, "Anger is the enemy of the wise," to the beginning level student. Anger is said to be an expression of Raja Guna and the student is told to diminish Raja Guna within himself as much as possible.

Delusion arises from anger. The mind is bewildered by delusion. Reasoning is destroyed when the mind is bewildered. One falls when reasoning is destroyed. (2.63)

Arjuna said: O Krishna, what impels one to commit sin as if unwillingly and forced against one's will? (3.36)

The Supreme Lord said: It is desire and anger born of Raja Guna. Raja Guna is insatiable and is a great devil. Know this as the enemy. (3.37)

After years working to diminish anger, the student may find he has come to rely on suppression. He can ignore what he is really feeling and "appear" peaceful. Now he is told,

The deluded ones, who restrain their organs of action but mentally dwell upon the sense objects, are called hypocrites. (3.06)

His best efforts to control his actions cannot bring the result he is now asked to achieve. And he cannot will his mind to be free from anger.

He has been taught to see anger as an expression of Raja Guna, one of the three Gunas, or qualities of nature. Now he is taught that the Gunas are an aspect of material nature and are God's eternal creation. The root of anger cannot be destroyed.

There is no being, either on the earth or in the heaven or among the Devas, who is free from these three Gunas of Prakriti, the material nature. (18.40)

Know that the three Gunas emanate from Me. ... (7.12)

If they are eternal aspects of material nature, they can never be eradicated, but they can be transcended.

When the seer perceives no doer other than the Gunas, and knows That which is above and beyond the Gunas; then he attains Nirvana. (14.19)

When one transcends the three Gunas, which are the source of the body, one is freed from birth, old age, disease, and death; and attains Nirvana. (14.20)

The one who remains like a witness; who is not moved by the Gunas, thinking that the Gunas only are operating; who stands firm and does not waver. (14.23)

The student is now encouraged to allow his anger and desires to flow inside without any need to restrain or suppress them. He detaches himself from any need to express or act on them also.

One attains peace in whose mind all desires enter without creating any disturbance, as river waters enter the full ocean without creating a disturbance. One who desires material objects is never peaceful. (2.70)

The effect is that the Yogi moves beyond anger, but not in the way he might have imagined. The goal is found on an unexpected route where the Yogi has as much anger as anyone else. But the Yogis' anger is different. It does not hurt him or others, and it becomes an expression of aliveness. The Yogi is not suppressed or divided within himself. He is like Shiva wearing serpents as ornaments. The serpents are deadly to the ordinary person but they have no power to hurt Shiva.

Hidden Meanings and Intentional Deception in Yoga Texts

Most Hatha Yoga and Tantric texts consist of lists of practices and rituals that progress from more simple to more complex, or in many cases from conceivable to inconceivable. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, for example, progresses from postures in the first chapter,

Stretch both legs straight on the ground and holding with the hands the two big toes, one should stay with one's forehead placed on one's knees. This is called Paschimotanasana. (1.28)

To very complex exoteric practices called Mudras in the third and forth chapters.

When the Yogi is in a state in which both Chitta (mindstuff) and Prana (lifeforce energy) have lost themselves in an Antarlakshya (internal focus) and the gaze is directed outwards below, with eyeballs steady, seeing yet not seeing, that indeed is the Shambhavi Mudra, (Shiva's goddess Mudra) acquired by the grace of the Guru, in which one flashes forth the one ultimate principle of Shambhu, (God) which can neither be said to be Shunya (void) nor Ashunya (not void). (4.37)

Swami Kripalu taught that, the Hatha Yoga texts were not meant to be understood by reading. They were the secret books of the Yoga mystery schools. They were written in such a way that they could not be understood without a teacher to explain them. This is what is meant by the phrase "acquired by the grace of the Guru," in the verse above.

If the texts were stolen, or found by non- initiates, or studied by a student at a lower level, the practices could not be discerned. In some cases specific practices are described using symbolism. Here the reader may think he understands, but practice is either useless or possibly mentally or physically harmful.

Swami Kripalu indicated that sometimes the order of the techniques was scrambled to hide the stages of the schools technology. This occurs in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika where ten techniques called Mudras are described. Sequenced appropriately, the Mudras would affect sections in the trunk of the body from the pelvis to the crown. All the Mudras together form a bridge by which energy generated in the pelvis can flow to the head. Each Mudra builds on the next, or as Swami Kripalu described it, " there is only one Mudra, it just occurs in ten different places." In the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, each Mudra is described, but the order is scrambled. The instructions that activate or start the first

Mudra are hidden in symbolism towards the end of the third chapter. Nothing is clear and much speculation has been published as to how the Mudras should be practiced and what effects they should have.

In an initiatory school, the teacher might sit with a student who is ready for the next level of initiation, take out the text and reveal the meaning of a pertinent verse. As the text is unraveled, and the students understanding and experience grows, the practice, text and teacher, become personifications of his tradition and a link to the ancient masters of his path.

Swami Kripalu once unintentionally gave an example of how the vagueness of the Sanskrit language could reveal the layers of practice and philosophy hidden in the mystery schools.

A day after he gave a talk where he quoted verses from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, he was approached by a student with a question from the lecture.

The student's question was that Swami Kripalu had translated the verse, "Yogash chitta vritti nirodhah," as, "Yoga is stopping the modifications of mind," with Nirodhah translated as "stopping." The student had searched for Nirodhah in a Sanskrit dictionary and found that it had several meanings: Holding in, confining, restraining, coercing, oppressing. He asked Swami Kripalu which meaning was the "real meaning." Swami Kripalu smiled and said, "All of them, at different stages."

There are many places in the Yoga Sutras and other texts where words have multiple meanings that could lead to a variety of interpretations. Someone with an understanding of Sanskrit could interpret the whole text in several different ways, from very passive to very willful.

In Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, we have other evidence for a multi-layered practice. The eight limbs are eight categories of practices and each could be seen as growing out of or being prepared for by the previous.

A Pratyahar is a concentration technique where by the student focus his attention on a sense exclusive of a sense object. For example, to close your eyes and gaze with your focus on the act of gazing, not at anything you might see. This technique, practiced under the right conditions can lead to a profound awareness of "the one who gazes" or the "seer behind seeing." There are many Pratyahar techniques and they are all more powerful if the student has practiced Pranayama first. It is as if the Pratyahar is an extension or focusing of the Pranayama.

Many Hatha Yoga texts give specific Dharana practices. All can be seen as extensions of Pratyahar.

Integration of Swami Kripalu's Practice and Pashupata Marga

The practices of both Lakulisha and Swami Kripalu were designed to make the practitioner so strong within himself that he could raise energy and dissolve Ahankara.

Both generate insecurities that the seeker practiced sitting through and in the process came to experience that they were not the body, mind or Ahankara.

I would like to address two important questions at this point. What were the levels of practice and initiation in the two paths; do we know and can they be recreated? And, are the paths appropriate for modern practitioners?

First, do we know the levels of initiation and practice? No, they have been lost and I seriously doubt we will ever know the exact structure. The Pashupata Sutra describes many practices and several modes of existence, without indicating when one should move from one to another. Some scholars have seen each of the five chapters of the text as a different stage of practice.¹²

I personally know of several initiations or ‘Dikshas’ in Swami Kripalu’s path, and I believe there were more. Some of the initiations are formal commitments between teacher and student, each with practices involved. Others are primarily pieces of information required by the student in order to understand and progress through a difficult energy or meditation experience. The ones I know of through direct experience are:

- Mantra initiation
- Sanyasa initiation
- Shaktipata initiation
- Initiation into the Mudras or yogic secrets

In addition to the initiations, one can see layers of practice in Swami Kripalu’s guidance on Asana practice. Swami taught the following approach to Asanas.¹³

- Practice Pranayama for one month
- Practice Asanas normal breathing
- Practice Asanas with Kumbhak
- Practice Asanas with spontaneous kumbhak
- Practice Spontaneous Asanas with Kumbhak

The antisocial practices of the Pashupatas would not be appropriate in the modern world, and Swami Kripalu’s intense Yoga practices take more time and dedication than most of us could spare. Does that mean that these paths should be allowed to die, to be found only in history and philosophy books?

As a student of Swami Kripalu’s path and someone who has dabbled in the practices of Pashupata Marg, I agree that the practices are not appropriate. At the same time, if they are not explained and understood the foundation of our path is lost.

What if, instead of looking at the practices, and stages of practice, of Swami Kripalu and the Pashupatas, we look at what they were trying to achieve through the practices and stages and then explored other means of achieving similar results? My research has

¹² Yogeshvara Muna, Five Faces of Shiva (Pashupata Surta)

¹³ Asana and Mudra, Commentary on HYP and Sadhak’s Companion- instruction in Asana practice

shown me that all the practices and rituals associated Swami Kripalu and the Pashupatas were designed to do one or more of the following:

- Strengthen the Ahankara
- Cultivate internal sensitivity
- Raise energy
- Dissolve Ahankara

We will look at each.

Strengthen the Ahankara

When the Ahankara is forming, false or conflicting ideas may be accepted as truth and integrated into it. If I receive a strong message from my parents that says I don't deserve love, I may come to identify myself as someone who not deserving love, and live my life pushing love away. If I integrate a conflicting belief into my Ahankara I may paralyze myself at one pole or another, afraid of the conflict that I would experience between.

For example, I may flip from being the best to being the worst, but be very uncomfortable anywhere in-between. Conflicts between Ahankara and reality are sources of pain, and Ahankara tends to separate from and distort reality to avoid this pain. The more Ahankara needs to distort reality to maintain itself, the less we can know truth.

An intermediate goal on the path to freedom from Ahankara is to develop an Ahankara that is malleable. It can adjust to what is true in each moment without needing to become rigid from fear of change.

Cultivate internal sensitivity

To work with mind or Ahankara we must cultivate awareness of what is happening inside. The defenses that keep Ahankara intact are subtle and if we are to learn how they work we must come to know the triggers and responses.

On both paths, the seekers are taught to sit with strong emotion. The emotion being an expression of Prana or Shiva, is to be witnessed. The Ahankara's first response to strong emotion is to channel it in to an action or a belief that it can stand behind. For example, if I become angry, I will look for someone to blame, or focus all of my attention on making the anger go away. In either situation the Ahankara is safely hidden behind the scenes.

It is the awareness that internal sensitivity brings that shifts the focus to Ahankara and reveals that it as not our true self.

Raise energy

In both paths, transformation is an energy phenomenon, not a mental one. Since Ahankara is behind or above the mind, it tends to direct thoughts rather than be subject to them. Flooding the Ahankara with energy and experiencing the dissolving of sense of self brings profound change.

Dissolve Ahankara

When Ahankara dissolves in energy we have no choice but to helplessly surrender to the experience. This may happen in normal life when we have a sexual orgasm or when we have a near death experience. We may feel so much joy or pain that we have the experience of dissolving. We may interpret it as dissolving into oneness or into nothingness. Regardless of our interpretation, the experience of Ahankara dissolving is one of mystery and transformation.

The ancient practices followed by Swami Kripalu and espoused by Lakulisha may not be appropriate for modern practitioners, but if we apply these four points to any Yoga practice we will find that they all serve to further one or more of the points. We could say that accomplishing these four points is Yoga. One tradition or practice may focus more on one or another, they may focus on one exclusively or a blend several, but they all serves these four ends.

If we accept this premise, the modern Yoga world changes. Instead of conflicting approaches, each an island perhaps believing its approach to be the true or best way, or at least hoping that it is valid. We now have many schools focusing of essential aspects of transformation.

How old school layers were lost

If all the old schools of Yoga were multi-layered as I am suggesting, how did the layers get lost. How did they become the simple one-approach traditions we have today? We will never know exactly how depth was lost. It is easier to lose wisdom than to gain it and there have been many forces through the ages that would support the loss of Yoga wisdom.

Political and social change has weakened or ended many elaborate spiritual systems. A Hatha Yoga Text called the Gheranda Samhita says that advanced Yoga should be practiced , “...in a good country where the king is just, where food is abundant and where there are no disturbances.”¹⁴

I saw that some of the initiations were so secretive in Swami Kripalu’s path that students didn’t even know about them until they were given. A master could die before passing on more advanced material, or students could leave after years of study and practice thinking they knew everything the teacher had to teach. Perhaps after leaving a teacher or school they started their own school thinking they had a complete path.

An incomplete transfer of information becomes more likely when you consider as Swami Kriplau said, “A teacher may have thousands of students and only have one or two who is worthy of the highest teaching.”¹⁵

Kripalu to Amrit

Someone observing Swami Kripalu’s Sadhana over a period of a few days would probably notice that he was very disciplined. Ten hours out of each day he spent in the

¹⁴ Gheranda Samhita Chapter 5, verse 5.

¹⁵ Swami Kripalu Discourse

meditation room. He practiced silence except for rare occasions.¹⁶ He kept no food in his dwelling and ate what was served to him twice each day. These rituals and practices would fit into the categories of strengthening Ahankara and raising energy.

Inside his meditation room, Swami Kripalu practiced a meditation technique based on total surrender to Prana. This was his leading edge and what he talked about most. This fits into the categories of cultivating internal sensitivity and dissolving Ahankara.

What Amrit heard from Swami Kripalu was what most interested Swami Kripalu at the time. It was also what Amrit was most inclined to hear. Amrit tended to diminish the strengthening the container and raise energy aspects of yogic transformation, and to focus on surrender.

Making Kripalu Yoga more whole

If my conclusions about four purposes of practice for all Yoga traditions are correct I see two exciting possibilities.

First, Kripalu Yoga could be made more powerful by aligning it with the original purposes of the traditions we have descended from. Kripalu Yoga's structure with a focus on surrender (stage 3) and cultivating internal sensitivity is very healing. We teach students to attune to energy but we haven't mapped out or focused on the process of increasing or raising energy. We have a mysterious category called 'altered states' that can occur through Yoga experience, but we don't capitalize on the fact that most Yoga happens in altered states. They were the goal of the practice and the field of transformation.

We see a value in a 'vigorous' or challenging practice but we haven't accepted it as an integral aspect of the 'full' Kripalu path. This is revealed in the confusion occurring at Kripalu now in the discussion of what to do with hot vigorous Yoga. The guests and staff love it, but we don't know how to fit it into Kripalu Yoga.

What does it mean to generate altered psychological states and to align Ahankara with the truth revealed in the experience, and perceive the truest reality (social reality against ultimate reality); to witness and align Ahankara as we would the body. We have a tie in to 'Yoga off the mat' and Self study.

Would we have to work with Ahankara in this way in every class? Definitely not, but what if it was valued and respected as an advanced stage of our path that we could all move toward at a pace we felt comfortable. Some folks would never go there, but if the process were contexted well they would respect it and draw inspiration from it.

When Swami Kripalu was living in Sumneytown, and I was a 'new brother' in the community, he was all we talked about. And we all talked about how he meditated ten hours each day. Most of us had no intention of ever doing such a thing ourselves. Some of us aspired to it and a few achieved it. But knowing that someone could meditate ten

¹⁶ When he arrived in America he had just ended a period of 12 years spent in silence, followed by silence except on rare occasions where he gave public discourses. During his first three months in America he spoke almost daily. After this he returned to speaking only on rare occasions.

hours a day and that someone was doing it close by gave us tremendous inspiration. To have a focused path with stages ahead of us doesn't have to cause self-rejection or lead to pushing.

We haven't focused a lot on raising energy. We do cover it in the Teaching the Deeper Practices program, but there it is mostly from holding a posture to get to Stage 3. What about raising energy to change perception? And what about learning to live at higher energy levels?

Second, In the Yoga world, I see Kripalu Yogis as being somewhat shy. We don't have a Guru or founder who will say this is the way it is to be done. We are figuring it out on our own and we know it. I think many of us who identify ourselves as Kripalu teachers are insecure when we encounter a new approach or another style.

If my four purposes model is accepted, a vision forms that sees the value in all traditions. Each holds a piece. And Kripalu has the vision that holds them all together. There are traditions that focus on strengthening the container. They are a part of us. They have taken one part of the path and developed really good ways to do it. Maybe they do it better than we do. Maybe they have focused on doing it so well for so long that they have lost sight of the rest of the path.

We are influenced a lot these days by the Buddhist path. The Buddha studied from several prominent yogis in his day before thinking that he had learned all they had to teach him and walking away to start his own path. Many practitioners have discovered that the inner sensitivity and awareness developed by Vipassana is a wonderful way to do and could compliment an Asana or Pranayama practice perfectly.

Maybe we can learn from them how to do what we do better. Or we could recognize the beauty of what others have developed and go to Ashtanga to strengthen our physical containers and go to the Kundalini folks to raise our energies, without losing our identities as Kripalu practitioners on a very clear and focused path.

Summary

Astronomers observing the night sky have noticed that all the heavenly bodies are in constant chaotic motion. Their basic movement is away from each other in a universal explosion. This outward-from-center trajectory is masked and distorted by passing gravitational attractions.

With computers, scientists have traced the routes of the stars backwards and have discovered that they all came from the same place, a primordial body of matter that exploded eons ago to create the diverse universe we live in today.

Scientists and philosophers have pondered and speculated over what caused this primordial body to "explode" into universal diversity. Perhaps there was just too much for one structure to contain, too many forces seeking expression, too much paradox to be held together.

Just as astronomers see millions of distinct objects in the sky, each moving at it's own speed and in it's own direction, so too, the Yoga world is filled with schools, traditions and philosophies. They have many goals; enlightenment, physical well-being, peace and still mind, physical fitness, stress reduction, cross-training to stretch contracted muscles, and just because it feels good.

Their techniques range from: meditations and mantras, diet and lifestyle prescriptions, physically demanding Asana routines, slow gentle Asana flows, Asanas jumped into and out of very fast, and Asanas held for long periods of time with visualizations and specific breathing patterns.

What if each of these paths represented a piece of a master school that has been lost. What if sincere practitioners had dived deep into the pieces they inherited from a master school and explored them to a profound degree. Perhaps techniques that were meant to be bridges became islands.

For example, what if Asanas were meant to be practiced intensely for a few years, with the purpose of conditioning the body and opening energetic or physic doorways. When the doors were opened, experiences could occur through Pranayama or meditation that could not be reached without the mental and physical conditioning that Asana brought.

When Asana became an island and practitioners looked longer and more closely, they discovered an amazing diversity of form and effect. Asana could be much more than the Hatha Yoga masters of ancient times intended. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika says several times that Hatha Yoga is just a stairway to Raja Yoga¹⁷ and Asanas provide the steadiness for meditation to occur according to Patanjali¹⁸.

When Asana is done out of context, it can lead to a supple and powerful body filled with vitality and strength. And Asana can bring healing to a body that is weak and injured.

The Yogis of the past sometimes meditated until metaphoric smoke poured out of their years and their Tapas was radiant like the sun. Through meditation, Yogis made the throne of Indra the king of heaven shake so strongly that he fell off and the Yogis were able to take his place. The Buddha meditated so powerfully that all the demons were uprooted from their lairs in the underworld and ran to accuse him. They clustered around him shouting accusations challenging his purity. The Buddha reached down, touched the earth, and continued meditating.

For these traditions, meditation was the high pinnacle accomplished by work through many levels and involving many techniques. For modern practitioners, meditation provides peace at the end of a hectic day, and gives us something to remember when life pulls us into intense situations.

¹⁷ Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Chapter 1, verse 1. For *sadhakas* expecting to mount to the most high *Raja Yoga*, this wisdom-filled *Hatha Yoga* which is like a shining staircase, is given by lord *Adinatha*; to this *Adinatha*, reverence!

¹⁸ Patanjali Yoga Sutra, Chapter 2, verses 46-47. That which is a steady and comfortable posture is called *asana*, which is achieved by relaxation of effort and meditaion on the infinite.

The tools are useful. Each piece is powerful. And what if they were combined in an informed manner. What if the power of each practice was respected and practitioners could draw upon each piece under the guidance of an informed teacher, or chosen from their own self-study and commitment to be true to themselves. What if we could move from one style of Yoga to another, from Yoga to meditation, and from Zazen to Metta. What if we could move from one to another, not looking for the “best” path or the “right” path, but looking for what we need to continue to grow. Not looking for what is easy, but looking for what will help us most to be true to ourselves.

What I have just described is happening in the world in an informal; haphazard way. People are practicing a wide variety of approaches to health and growth unconsciously or out of curiosity. Some traditions protect their identity by discouraging students from exploring other paths by encouraging allegiance to their path or teacher. Other, more open paths, risk losing their identity by accepting the influx of new, perhaps contradictory ideas that happens as their members reach out to try new things.

This is happening and cannot be stopped. What if Kripalu established itself as a leader in the Yoga world by developing a grounded, historically based philosophy that saw every Yoga practice and approach under the umbrella of Kripalu Yoga.

This is what our Yoga does. It has stages where we explore to see what we need to grow cultivating inner sensitivity, strengthen our container, raise our energy, or learn to witness the dissolving of Ahankara. It offers a variety of practices, and programs, that help students us do this. And perhaps it suggests they we draw upon the skills or practices of another tradition or approach for a period of time, respecting what each tradition offers the practitioner of Kripalu Yoga.