

# Yoga Frequently Asked Questions

What is Hatha yoga?

What is Kripalu\* yoga?

What is Viniyoga or yoga in the tradition of Krishnamacharya and Desikachar?

Is yoga a religion?

What's with that OM thing?

What kind of yoga does Shula teach?

How does yoga facilitate wellness?

How do I choose a yoga teacher?

What is yoga therapy?

What is the Tapas Acupressure Technique (TAT)?

## What is Hatha yoga?

Hatha yoga is the physical discipline that falls within a group of ancient spiritual and philosophical traditions of India called "yoga." It is only one of the eight limbs of yoga identified by the Indian sage Patanjali.

The word "yoga" has been interpreted to mean "joining", with the first syllablerepresenting the moon and the second, the sun. Metaphorically, the joining of these two elements thus can mean the integration of mind and body.

Yoga has been used in North America to benefit chronically ill, injured and postoperative individuals. It has been shown to be beneficial for a range of health problems such as back pain, stress, recovery from cancer and addictions, chronic fatigue, depression and AIDS.

# What is Kripalu\* yoga?

In Sanskrit, "kripalu" means compassion and Kripalu\* yoga is named after Swami Kripalvanandaji, who established this particular yoga tradition. The Kripalu practice of hatha yoga combines yoga postures with breathing techniques and a focused, compassionate attitude towards oneself during practice. This combination is used as a vehicle for finding energy blocks in the body. The act of seeking out and then releasing physical tensions awakens and develops trust in the body's inner wisdom, facilitating deep feelings of well-being.

## **Kripalu Yoga's Three-stage Methodology**

From the Kripalu Yoga Teacher Training Manual, Kripalu Yoga Fellowship

Stage One introduces you to the various yoga postures and breathing practices. You study how the human body functions in general and where your own body is open or closed, strong and weak. Here you are being carefully trained in what is anatomically safe and appropriate for your particular body. Your focus is concentrated in alignment and coordination of breath. Here you learn how far to go in the stretch and how long to safely hold without injuring your body.

Then, using the increased awareness you have gained through stage one practice, you attune to internal sensations with compassion and awareness. You begin to hold the postures longer as you enter the Second Stage of Kripalu Yoga. You begin to understand your habitual reactionary patterns by observing the interplay of body and the sensations within from the perspective of the Detached witness. Because you can now study your body using the techniques and tools of yogic awareness, you come to understand slowly and internally how to move through any limitations present in your system. You discover new movement, developing more strength and range of motion, not only in your body but in your life as well.

During this process, if you are afraid of getting hurt, are pushing too fast or are aggressive, your body will contract and produce additional tensions. By maintaining an attitude of loving self-observation, however, you begin to understand the ways you unconsciously layer yourself with tension upon tension. You also learn that you can feel safe and relaxed by breathing deeply and being compassionately present to your whole experience. Through alternating instructing your body what to do with allowing it to guide you, you develop a healthy partnership with your body. Instinct and instructions, body and mind, right- and left-brain hemispheres become balanced.

The result of this attunement can open the body's own evolutionary signals and, if they and your awareness are strong enough, you will feel an intuitive guidance moving your body from one position to another. This is Stage Three of Kripalu Yoga. This is where the practitioner offers the body to spirit, opens an

invitation for prana to be the guide and allows the controlling mind to release its duties as authority. As the yoga evolves and union touches deeper levels of your being... a position of attention solidifies within, at the core of your body. Unmoving, your spirit is at rest, while all around you your body is alive, breathing and moving through positions and gestures, sounds and sensations. You remember what you already always knew, that spirit lives in you.

## **The Core of Kripalu Yoga**

Shobhan Richard Faulds, President of Kripalu Yoga Fellowship

### 1. Encouraging self-sourcing and creating emotional and psychological safety.

Our role as teachers is to support students in accessing their own source consciousness. One of the ways we do this is by teaching yoga within the safety of a bonded and caring group and by encouraging students to be compassionate toward themselves. Kripalu is a path with heart, and that heart energy is reflected in the personal qualities of our teachers and the learning environments they create.

### 2. A respect for the body's limits and a focus on breathing and the internal experience of practice.

We teach people a yoga they can practice wherever they happen to be in terms of flexibility and fitness. While proper alignment is important, the internal experience of yoga practice is far more important than the external goal of achieving the idealized posture.

### 3. Attunement to energy and awakening prana.

We teach people how to shift from the thinking centre to the feeling centre and thereby free up the flow of energy in their bodies. This includes the three stages of body and breath awareness, holding the posture, and meditation-in-motion. The increase in vitality and self-awareness that comes from Kripalu Yoga is a by-product of this free flow of energy.

### 4. Yoga on and off the mat.

The full expression of Kripalu Yoga is a way of being that allows us to embrace the divine mystery of life. It is much more than the practice of asana. Kripalu Yoga is about using the heightened awareness and deepened compassion that results from yoga practice to create a lifestyle supportive of our deepest identity and highest aspirations.

For more information about Kripalu\* programs, visit the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, in Lenox, MA, USA.

# What is Viniyoga or yoga in the tradition of Krishnamacharya and Desikachar?

“In youth, our practice supports growth, and as we age, it should promote and maintain our health and stability.”

“Viniyoga” is a term that has been used to describe the integration of elements of yoga to develop a practice specific to the individual’s needs as taught by Sri T. Krishnamacharya. A descendant of the legendary 9th century yogi Nathamuni, Krishnamacharya’s yoga teaching is firmly rooted in his lifetime scholarship of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras. Krishnamacharya was the most influential yoga teacher of his time. His son, T.K.V. Desikachar, studied with his father for more than 35 years and is the current lineage holder.

In this tradition, “Yoga is a holistic science that stems from a well-founded theoretical basis, rather than as mere exercises for physical fitness... Anyone who wants to can practice yoga that is specifically suited to his or her needs and experience its multiple benefits.” (from the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram website ([www.kym.org](http://www.kym.org)))

The elements of a yoga class that distinguish this school of yoga from others are the emphasis of linking breath and movement and the use of adaptations in asana (postures):

- Breath and movement are linked together as a way to move the body and quiet the mind. In Viniyoga, students are taught that the breath should actually lead the body into and out of each posture. Viniyoga is less concerned with arduous precise exercises than with developing a balanced and appropriate practice for each student.

- Viniyoga encourages students to practice each asana according to their individual needs and capabilities. Therefore, adaptations to accommodate a person’s unique physical circumstances are used to facilitate the function of the posture over the form.

- Depending on the person’s emotional and spiritual needs, meditation, chanting, prayer and ritual can be incorporated into yoga practices to deepen them and enrich yoga practitioners’ lives.

Prepared with material from the Viniyoga New York website ([viniyogany.com](http://viniyogany.com)).

## Is Yoga a religion?

The short answer is: no. The long answer is: not necessarily. Yoga can be treated as simple physical exercise, as an introspective mind/body experience or as an integral part of a system of worship. In this case, the yoga practice itself is not inherently religious in nature, but is treated as a way to access and communicate with the Divine by fostering deep meditative states, experiences of which are interpreted through the lens of a particularly mythology or theology.

## What's with that OM thing?

The OM sound of classical yoga has been used by almost every Eastern religion to signify one thing or another in their particular theologies. However, in classical yoga, OM is used purely as a psychological tool. These aspects of OM were described in the 2,500-year-old yoga writing called the Manduka Upanishad. In this book, OM was interpreted as an allegory for four different states of consciousness. In actual practice, the OM sound is pronounced more like "AUM." Thus the first part, the A sound, is said to represent the awake and conscious self. The U sound is believed to refer to the subconscious, asleep and dreaming, self. The third element of OM, the M, signifies the unconscious self of deep and dreamless sleep. Finally, the fourth dimension of OM, the silence before and after its vocalization, is related to the part of the self that exists in silence, in the quiet of the meditating mind that is the witness consciousness.

The use of OM in yoga and yoga-related meditation is intended as a point of focus, as a way to lead one's mind gently into peace and silence, and thus to greater knowledge of one's own self.

Adapted from The American Yoga Association's *Easy Does it Yoga: The Safe and Gentle Way to Health and Well-being*, by Alice Christensen (Simon and Schuster, 1999)

# What kind of yoga does Shula teach?

## My Approach to Yoga

I am a certified Kripalu yoga instructor and a Registered Yoga Teacher with the Federation of Ontario Yoga Teachers. I am currently completing the Kripalu Professional certification program.

I completed the two-week Integrative Yoga Therapy Core Intensive training in July, 2000, and a one-year Viniyoga Foundations program through Viniyoga Britain. In addition, I am certified by and registered with the Federation of Ontario Yoga Teachers. I believe it is important to support and promote Canadian yoga institutions. I have a regular personal practice and a one-on-one relationship with a teacher who carries me along the path of personal transformation. It is my conviction, based on experience, that regular sadhana (practice) is essential to my teaching.

My approach to yoga is introspective and breath-focused, informed by the Kripalu and Viniyoga traditions. It is designed to enable you to:

- 1) Access your body's own wisdom, so you can promote health and wholeness for your self;
- 2) Connect breath and movement, so the breath can lengthen and deepen and you can become invigorated and relaxed.

The physical experience of yoga in a class I lead can be gentle or vigorous. At all times, I encourage self-awareness and self-respect. In my opinion, the practice of yoga is not measured by how "pretzel-y" you can get: it lies in the experience of each pose. This can mean, for example, not bending so far forward in a standing forward bend position that your hands touch the ground if doing so means strain, stress or difficulty breathing. If you cannot achieve a pose with "effortless effort," then you are not benefiting from the deepest experience of yoga. Depending on the emotional and spiritual needs or purpose of a class, meditation, chanting, prayer and ritual can be incorporated to deepen the practice.

As you continue in your practice, you may find that the introspective and mind-calming nature of yoga leads you to a deeper relationship with, and awareness of, your self and perhaps into a closer relationship with the Divine Source, however you define and experience it.

## How does yoga facilitate wellness?

Inactivity is directly associated with much of what is usually considered to be the effects of aging or illness. According to Alice Christensen in her book *Easy Does It Yoga*, inactive people spend more weeks bedridden, visit doctors more often, have a lower opinion of their health and die younger than those who maintain an active lifestyle. Inactivity also contributes to a shallow breathing pattern, which decreases the flow of oxygen to the body and brain, causing sleepiness and sluggishness. From this example, it is clear that it is the yoga practitioner's physically active lifestyle that leads to claims of better health, greater longevity and increased mental alertness.

It is easy to see how a person with the inactive lifestyle described above would also experience feelings of depression and anxiety and how yoga acts to counteract that effect of inactivity. The body responds to disuse (and pain) by tightening the muscles around the area that is painful or stiff, and this tension often creeps into the rest of the body. As well as creating unnecessary tension and pain in your body, the creeping of muscle contraction from an affected area into the rest of your body can have an effect on your breathing. When your intercostals (the rib tissues) contract, the rib cage and chest are constricted, making breathing difficult, and as we have seen, shallow breathing has all sorts of negative effects.

The expansion of muscle contraction from an affected area to the rest of your body is caused by an overall contraction of the fascia and muscle. The fascia is the membrane, or sac, that holds your body together. It covers, supports and separates the body's muscles. Due to inactivity, the muscles themselves have become weak and have lost muscle tone and mass, and the fascia has responded to that loss of tone by tightening up. This contraction is a natural reaction to injury or weakness and is part of the body's healing mechanism, the purpose of which is to impede movement so that healing can occur. In addition, slow and progressive contraction of the fascia is a natural process that begins in young adulthood and can be exacerbated by injury or illness. Fascia can also be stimulated to contract by the nervous system, for example, during activation of the fight-or-flight response or other perceived threats to the body/mind. As a person becomes older, it takes less stimulation to contract the fascia, and once contracted, the fascia will take longer to release.

Yoga can help inhibit and perhaps even reverse this process (whether it is due to injury, illness or inactivity) by facilitating gentle, non-aggressive stretch and release of the fascia and muscles. It is extremely important to note that the advantage arises from the gentle nature of yoga, and it's non-doing approach that does not activate the sympathetic nervous system. The stretching helps develop the ability to relax muscles at will. As muscles stretch, they lengthen; this lengthening of the muscles is beneficial because longer muscles are more efficient and less prone to injury. Even if you are currently unable to move a

certain part of your body, or its movement is restricted, practicing the yogic breathing and the preparatory steps for an asana can help improve its function. Studies have shown that, when you think about moving a part of your body, electrical impulses to that area increase. Continued stimulation of an area with these impulses is a crucial part of regaining its function.

The practice of yoga asanas (or postures) addresses wellness on a whole-body level. Asanas affect the spine, maintaining its flexibility and strength through proper exercise. This in turn increases circulation, ensuring the supply of nutrients and oxygen to the nerves. In addition, asanas work on the internal body, stimulating key pressure points that govern the flow of life energy or prana (also known as qi or chi). The internal organs are also massaged and stimulated by the body's movement into and out of asana, which tones them into functioning more efficiently.

## How to choose a yoga teacher

In her book *How Yoga Works*, Eleanor Criswell quotes Haridas Chaudhuri on the qualities of a good yoga teacher:

"A mature spiritual guide sees to it that the disciple does not become emotionally fixated on him. His main job is to help the disciple to discover the divine guru (teacher) within the disciple's own unconscious psyche. As soon as the disciple learns to stand on his own feet, capable of treading the right path leading to the ultimate goal, the guru gracefully parts company, liberating the disciple from his last emotional bonds."

From Pat Burke, New England Yoga Alliance:

Professional yoga teachers will speak knowledgeably and respectfully about different yoga traditions. A teacher may specialize in gentle yoga, an athletic vigorous approach, or be trained in a style that is somewhere in the middle. The teacher's role is to enable you to find the practice that compliments your inherent constitution and not to try to sell you on his or her class.

The cheapest deal in town is not necessarily the best. Factors such as class size, the cost of maintaining the space, equipment and staff are important. Teachers who have established a studio usually incur higher expenses than a teacher in a recreation program or health club setting.

If your desire is to study yoga not as a form of exercise or entertainment but as a transformational personal practice, look for a facility that has hired a trained yoga teacher. Spiritual teachers do not generally speak in terms of "certification" programs.

Many individuals who teach yoga consider themselves lifelong students, rather than teachers.

Questions to ask of a potential teacher:

- In what tradition do you study?
- Who is your teacher?
- How long have you been practicing yoga?
- How long have you been teaching yoga?
- What is the emphasis of your teaching practice?

## What is Yoga Therapy?

The facet of yoga that focuses on the health and wellness of the physical body, yoga therapy encourages the balance and integration of the mind and emotions. It awakens the spiritual dimension. It is student centered, non-sectarian and non-hierarchical, with an equal focus on Mind, Body and Spirit.

Yoga Therapy addresses the needs of the individual with respect to:

- Age
- Specific physical conditions
- Culture and religion
- Student's goals or needs

The Yoga therapist is a guide or mentor for self-discovery. She or he creates a safe learning environment, uses the understanding of the elements of yoga to facilitate a safe environment for the student and creates an energetic space by being present for the student. A yoga therapist avoids judgment, diagnosing, advising, lecturing or counseling but rather communicates the form and essence of yoga.

A yoga therapist's tools of assessment include:

- Body and breath awareness exercises by the student
- Observation by the therapist at both the physical and subtle levels
- Student's own inner awareness
- Teacher's experiential understanding

Anyone with a desire to stretch—both literally and metaphorically—can benefit from yoga therapy.

# What is the Tapas Acupressure Technique (TAT)?

TAT or Tapas Acupressure Technique was developed in 1993 by Tapas Fleming, an acupuncturist in California. It is a very gentle procedure of holding a series of thoughts while placing your hands on your head (see below for illustration).

A person doesn't need a vision of the origins of their pain or disharmony in order to use TAT. In TAT, you review the event, problem or situation, and it becomes physically, mentally and emotionally integrated within moments.

TAT's basic theory suggests that the body's saying 'No' to something that happened creates a kind of body-held or body-based tension. Problems arise because some part of you continues to say 'No!' to an event, situation or problem. It's as if in some way you are saying, "I'm over here keeping that thing over there away from me." But the events of our lives aren't over there, they are real parts of us. TAT theory teaches that continually trying to hold off an experience stresses the body-mind-spirit, causing life energy to stagnate. From the point of view of Chinese medicine, which is the basis for TAT, this energy needs to flow. TAT creates the conditions for that flow, and thus for healing.

The transformational experience of TAT has a meditative quality and goes beyond conscious awareness. There are so many ways to describe the results of TAT: integration, harmony, peace, unity, connectedness, oneness and wholeness are a few of the terms people have used to express how they feel after a TAT session.

May be copied and/or reproduced for non-commercial purposes but please credit the author and link to her site. - Shulamit Day Berlevtov 2008 <http://shula.ca/>