

a life less ordinary

As director of Kripalu's Institute for Extraordinary Living, Stephen Cope hopes to illuminate yoga's gifts.



Stephen Cope trained to be an Episcopalian priest and practiced for many years as a psychotherapist. He now teaches yoga and yoga philosophy at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health. He is also the director of its 13-person Institute for Extraordinary Living, which researches the effects of yoga on a spectrum of human experience. He has written three books on the yoga tradition, including *The Wisdom of Yoga*, and is working on a fourth, a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, scheduled to be published in 2011 by Bantam.

Have you always been drawn to the mystical? I was raised Protestant. When I went to Amherst, I became a Presbyterian, then a Quaker. After college I danced professionally, then was a pianist for the Boston Conservatory of Music. I went to Episcopal Divinity School to be ordained as a priest, but in 1974, they weren't ordaining openly gay people. So I went to grad school and got a master's in social work. For 10 years, I ran a psychotherapy practice in Boston; during that time, I discovered yoga and Buddhist meditation.

How do yoga and psychology relate? Western psychology is preoccupied with the subjective, internal world. The Eastern contemplative traditions are interested in creating states of well-being—physical, mental, and spiritual. Contemplative practice isn't so much about looking into our own thoughts and stories, but about examining precisely how the mind works. Luckily, these days, Western psychology is learning from Eastern traditions, which is great.

How did you come to Kripalu? I was set to take a year's sabbatical at an Episcopalian monastery in Cambridge. A friend said, "Why don't you come to Kripalu with me?" So I went for a weekend. I was enthralled by this intelligent, engaged community of 350 living in a Jesuit monastery in the Berkshires. I experienced classical yoga, with ethical practice, mind-body awareness, meditation, pranayama (breathwork)—a raja-oriented path. I was fascinated by yoga and how it integrated many parts of me: the dancer part, the musician, the spiritual guy. So I came to Kripalu for a three-month sabbatical and ended up staying. That was 20 years ago.

What is the Institute for Extraordinary Living? For years I was Kripalu's senior scholar in residence. After my third book, I developed a research institute with scientists associated with Harvard Medical School. We started by teaching yoga and meditation to elite musicians, who have anxiety but can't impair their abilities with medication; they need behavioral interventions. Yoga helped them with anxiety, mood, and performance. We're working with the Department of Defense, studying how yoga can help active-duty military and returning veterans who have posttraumatic stress disorder. We're measuring the effects of yoga on high school students' academic performance and mood states. We are looking at obesity and type 2 diabetes, too. We're at the forefront of yoga research. ❀

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