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A Center for Meditation-in-Motion; Under Yogi Amrit Desai, Largest Ashram In US Fuses Gujarat Yoga, Siva & Health

Twenty-eight years ago Amrit Desai - painter, yogi and a maverick who often opposed the herd - worked from four to midnight in a paperbag factory in the industrial dregs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. To save cash to bring his wife and child from Gujarat, India, he walked home across a creepy crime zone. At daylight he was a student, often living on one meal a day.

Today, Yogi Amrit Desai walks across well-groomed lawns of his US $3,000,000 Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, 350-acres of gorgeous countryside in Massachusetts called Shadowbrook. The trees are changing into their red and yellow tones of autumn death. Next month Yogi Desai will be 57, his fall years. But he's still trim and limber, his long ebony hair slightly grayed. He draws in a slow breath of autumn smells and mountain prana - life-force. In a voice that wavers like a vina string, he talks to a eager group of students about prana. To them, he is Gurudev, the real center of the Center.

Behind Yogi Desai is a multi-wing brick building - as big as an ocean liner. Maps are helpful to find your way around. Inside are comfortably lodged up to 230 staff members and nearly 400 guests. Soon snow will bury Kripalu's lawn and whiten the trees, but the guests will still come, absorbing Yogi Desai's Kripalu Yoga or Meditation-in-Motion, refurbishing body and spirit...and skiing or snow-sledding.

Kripalu, "compassionate one," is a yoga ashram, the largest in the US. There are 300 staff residents - 60% women to 40% men, mostly single. As in time-lapse photography, Kripalu is a cyclone of activity and stillness. Groups of people flow out at dawn for meditation, hatha yoga and jogging while staffers crank up the kitchen and ready the health facilities. While at lunch with Yogi Desai during our HINDUISM TODAY interview he smilingly says, "It take 12 people just to chop all the vegetables for 1000 meals a day. We are now buying machines."

By evening - when ashramites wrapped in white Indian dress gather for bhajan - classes, bodywork, meetings, cleaning, repairing, publishing, and staying spiritualized bring a warm, worn feeling to the day. Lights out. Dream in.

Spiritual dynamics is a must here. Desai explains that brahmachariya celibacy holds much of Kripalu's power. Men and women live separately, but also eat in different halls and travel in separate cars. There is good harmony too. Notes Desai, "My life is such. No conflicts." A senior staffer half-jokingly confides the only thing they haven't figured out is how to consistently get the staff up for the 5:00 AM mediations. "Only the most determined attend," she says. Besides a cavernous meditation hall, the ashram's core is a Siva Lingam shrine room.

Kripalu is considered one of the best holistic health resorts in the US. Thousands of people come every year to undergo programs that range from married couples workshops to controlled fasts and mediation retreats. Desai says, "The work touches people's hearts. What brings them back is their life-changing experiences." But they also lose weight, loosen tensions and learn self-security. Is it a Hindu ashram to Desai? He clarified that he is "integrating yoga and Hinduism at the deepest level" but is reluctant to call Kripalu a Hindu ashram or to identify his students as Hindus because people might feel he was imposing his religion on them.

This Shadowbrook sanctuary is the north pole of Yogi Desai's self-made world that includes another older but smaller ashram - Kripalu Yoga Retreat - in rural Pennsylvania and some 46 home-centers. By his side are a bright band of long-time sishiyas, twelve of whom he initiated into a state of renunciation. They wear orange, but are not swami sannyasins, though Desai likes to call them swamis.

With quick, genuine deference he states Kripalu is the outcome of his guru's shakti. Yes, but when Amrit was a teenager he also studied positive-thinker Dale Carnegie, and when everybody his age was settling into the usual ruts, he took off to join the Indian Air Force to be a pilot. The first year he was a whiz kid, but the Air Force slotted him as a gunner. This was so morally repugnant to Desai he purposely scored low on tests. The Air Force washed him out.

Coming to America was his next maverick move. By 1966, he'd won awards for his

water-colors, owned a big Chevrolet car, was raising two of eventually three children and "started the Yoga Society of Pennsylvania that grew to be the largest one in America. I had 150 classes every week and trained 70 or 80 teachers."

In 1969 Desai returned to Gujarat, to the ashram of his guru, Swami Kripalvananda: Gita orator, reclusive yoga master and a scholar/author. To his inner circle, he was Bapuji, a man of intense sadhana who had so stimulated the sympathetic nerve system with prana that his body would automatically dance out a kinetic succession of asanas and mudras. Desai witnessed this when he was 16-years old, alone with Bapuji in his sadhana room - a singular privilege. To Babuji, Amrit Desai was favorite householder disciple, a man yoked to a destiny. At the end of the '69 stay, he gave Desai the title Yogi.

The following year Yogi Desai had a personal implosion in his sadhana that led to the creation of Kripalu Yoga. The experience focused him into his own unfoldment and he felt a need for personal retreat. He disbanded the Society and bought a home and property in the Pennsylvania countryside. But he fondly recalls, "The disciples just followed me there."

The tenacious students catalyzed him into greater teaching karmas as two major ashrams were quickly established in Pennsylvania. In 1974, he returned to India and received kriya yoga mantra initiation from Babuji and was empowered to initiate his own disciplines. Yogi Desai began giving kundalini shaktipat seminars, group meditations of "surrender" to whatever psychic energies were touched off by his presence. The results were energizing, but also explosive as hidden subconscious states and emotions bubbled up by stimulation of the pranas into the psychic ida current that controls the body and emotions. Desai stopped the seminars, reserving shaktipat for close sishiyas.

Not surprisingly, Desai has evolved a personal philosophy around prana, perceiving it as being the God-force of the universe, of being God. He writes: "This energy [prana] is further explained in Samkhya yoga philosophy as not only the undifferentiated Cosmic Spirit, God, or Purusha...but also what we recognize manifesting as the individual spirit, the spark of the divine within us."

While Desai was exploring prana, Babuji was observing silence - 12 years worth.

Secretly Desai wanted Babuji to come to the US. He built a house for him in secluded glen on the Kripalu Yoga Retreat property. The invitation went out. Incredibly, Babuji arrived in 1977. He stayed 4 years, silent except for 2 public talks a year. Many Hindus from the Gujarat community came for his darshan and be jewelled insights.

Swami Kripalvananda died in 1981 in India. It became known that he was patriarch of a new branch of the Pasupatas, a potent Saivite sect. For 1500 years Pasupatas swarmed over Gujarat. But they died out there centuries ago and are now nearly extinct elsewhere. In perspective, Swami Kripalvananda's loose linkage to Pasupata can be called neo-Pasupata as it is not an extension of this desiccated sect, but a new path that crossed his life in mysterious ways.

Yogi Desai and three other lay and sannyasin disciples of Babuji in India are the heirs to this neo-Pasupatism. As Desai explains, Babuji told them of the Pasupata path, but "nothing that he gave me directly as an education." Because Babuji left the subject foggy, it hangs over Kripalu like an invisible mist. It is only visible in the inner recesses of Kripalu where the residents attend Siva puja and sense a connection to Bapuji and his guru, Dadaji, a mythic figure tied to the origins of Pasupata.

After 30 years of teaching yoga, health and lifestyle, Yogi Desai is anchoring his ashramites into the bedrock of Hindu customs and culture. "We want to propagate our traditions, to learn the more orthodox ways of Siva worship and bhakti."

KRIPALU YOGA

In one memorable afternoon young Amrit Desai was treated to a display of Babuji's secret sadhana. Desai recounts: "His body began to move and flow in a very deep state of automatic pranic movement. The energy became so strong that his body was hurled across the room with tremendous force, dancing, moving, weaving in and out of complicated movements as I watched with awe." Desai couldn't comprehend the event even though Babuji explained it was a process called pranotthana, automatic awakening of the pranas. But it percolated deep into his subconscious.

By 1970 Desai was one of America's most successful yoga teachers, utilizing his knowledge, experience and charisma to coach students into asanas and a glimmering of mind concentration in raja yoga. In another extraordinary afternoon - this lime in Philadelphia - Desai stumbled into pranotthana: "All of a sudden my body began to move of its own volition, without the direction of my mind, spontaneously and effortlessly performing a series of flowing movements. Many of these 'postures' I had neither experienced before nor seen in any yoga book. Paradoxically, during this flowing movement of postures I was also drawn into the inner stillness of deep meditation and I entered into a unique combination of meditation and motion. This culminated in an expanded state of consciousness which filled me with ecstasy."

To Desai it was a surrender to the kundalini pranas. He called the experience Meditation-in-Motion and soon formalized it as Kripalu Yoga,

In his book on Kripalu Yoga he explains: "At the usual level then, prana merely sustains life, whereas at the evolutionary level, awakened prana accelerates healing, rejuvenation, and purification of body, mind and emotions...The power of this secret science of awakening prana lies not just in accessing it, but in also knowing how to raise it for the unfolding of the higher consciousness."

BABUJI

By the time he was 19 Sarasvati Chandra, who would become Swami Kripalvananda (Babuji), had contemplated suicide three times, frustrated by unrealistic spiritual ambitions. In Bombay, the youth met the swami he knew as Dadaji. He was from Bengal. His reputation included many tales of siddhis, supernormal powers. At their initial meeting, the swami, told Chandra to forsake his ideas of suicide. This startled Chandra, for he had confided this to no one.

Chandra spent fifteen months with Dadaji, culminating in a 40-day period of fasting. His solo sadhana during the time was a single pranayama and mantra. Then Dadaji disappeared after telling Chandra he would receive sannyas from another swami and only after that event would he see Dadaji again. Ten years later Chandra took sannyas from another swami. He later told how the single pranayama Dadaji taught empowered a series of kundalini phenomena in him. Much of his

secret personal sadhana was occupied in the unleashing of pranas into his sympathetic nerve system. The result was an exhaustive daily choreography of spontaneous mudras, asanas, gesturing and vocalizations. Unguided in kundalini, he studied yoga texts to gain feedback and direction. Eventually he assimilated his own sadhana system.

In 1952 Babuji says he again met Dadaji. It was a brief, surrealistic encounter in Rishikesh in which Dadaji was not his old swami persona, but a youth imbued with pranic luminosity. Babuji felt he'd seen Dadaji's perfected siddha form, an imperishable biological body that is the culmination of some siddha schools, but not of the Pasupata. After this event, Babuji saw his own kundalini sadhana as a means to attaining a permanent divine body. When he was in US from 1977-81, records were kept of his teeth, hair and skin to track any physiological changes. It is the contention of Yogi Desai that Babaji did attain God-samadhi and moksha (freedom from rebirth) but that "He will have to come back to attain the divine body."

In 1955 Babuji visited a temple at Kayavarohan, Gujarat. Inside was a Siva Lingam with a cherubic yogi known as Dadaji protruding from its surface. Bapuji recognized this image as his guru's immortal body. To Bapuji, this meant his guru was Dadaji, a mythic incarnation of Siva associated with the establishment of the Pasupata sect. Babuji established an ashram and temple at Kayavarohan.

DADAJI

Long ago the Pasupatas ("herdsman's staff") roamed India like it was a rich pasture for Siva-Realization. The Pasupatas are one of two oldest known Saiva sects and recede into remote periods far past historical footnotes.

After untold centuries of incognito life in wild forests, the Pasupata sect grew swiftly even though it was a supremely ascetic path. Among the Pasupata sadhanas was one to emulate the behaviour of an antisocial, flaunting all rules of decorum so as to invite censure by society. Thus personal ego was evaporated. Later me Pasupata re-entered society temporarily as a normal citizen, his Saiva identity and sadhanas practiced in secret. The Pasupatas were known as Siva's sorcerers.

According to all Pasupata texts, the sect was founded by a man named Nakulisha and even he was more legend than flesh. A Siva Purana list of incarnations names Lakulish - or Dadaji - the 28th incarnation of Siva, as the Pasupata founder. But almost all Saiva sects, including the Pasupatas, do not follow the avatar doctrine and the Siva Puranas aren't considered an authoritative text by the Saiva yoga schools. However, Swami Kripalvananda reports that Dadaji appeared as his guru. Kripalvananda gained his background of Pasupata from his library studies and believes that the phenomena of uninhibited pranic gesturing, dancing and crying he practiced is part of the Pasupata kundalini awakening process.