

FAST TRACKING TO INFINITY THE KRIYA YOGA OF GANESH BABA

PART 1

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Photo Credit: Dr. Keith G Lowenstein



Ganesh Baba. Self-Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine. Los Angeles, California. Early 1980's.

Every ancient school of thought or system of practice, no matter how profound and effective, periodically needs an update for the particular time, a fresh reformation to resonate with an ever-diversifying audience. This evolution of what is taught as well as how, is historically transmitted through masters willing and able to translate ancient practices for a contemporary audience. The lineage of Kriya Yoga is no exception.

Kriya Yoga is no less than a foundational practice for the direct experience of the infinite. Its practices are common to many of the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Paramahansa Yogananda, author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*, is the best-known Kriya Yoga master, but he was not the only yogi to bring Kriya Yoga to the West. One of these yogis was Ganesh Baba, formally Sri Mahant Swami Ganesh Ananda Saraswati Giri, who shared an accelerated and simplified system of Kriya Yoga until his death in 1987. Other students of Yogananda and other branches of the Lahiri line, like Paramahansa Hariharananda, who founded Kriya Yoga International, continue to teach Kriya around the globe.

Ganesh Baba was unique in several ways. Ganesh is the name of the elephant-headed god, commonly known as the remover of obstacles. Ganesh Baba lived up to the name, both placing and removing obstacles in the path of the student as a means of spiritual development. This dance of creating and removing obstacles allowed room for—and perhaps demanded—an untraditional teacher who could interact with and inspire the spiritually curious and psychedelically-centered counter-culture youth of mid-20th century America.

Ganesh Baba, like Yogananda, was born around 1892 in British India. He told a story of being a young child who was close to death from cholera only to be saved by Lahiri Mahasaya. Lahiri was the man responsible for bringing Kriya Yoga back into public consciousness after the practice had been lost for hundreds of years. Lahiri was an established householder and family man when the great Mahavatar Babaji appeared to him. Mahavatar Babaji is a Christ-like figure in Indian culture, a man who has roamed the foothills of the Himalayas for centuries, occasionally appearing to a select few to help humanity ascend and evolve into greater states of consciousness. Mahavatar Babaji taught Lahiri Mahasaya the Kriya Yoga technique and urged him to teach this ancient, powerful meditation system to all who wished to learn. Years later, when the choleric child was placed in Lahiri Mahasaya's arms, the Kriya Yoga guru bestowed upon him his first experience of Kriya, which saved Baba's life and allowed the child to fully recover.

Despite his early introduction into the wonders of Kriya, Ganesh Baba had secular obligations to fulfill before renouncing the material world and becoming a sadhu, a wandering monk. Baba attended school in British India and studied physics, quantum mechanics and Jungian psychology. He became a successful businessman, providing dowries for all eight of his younger sisters. It was not until



his mid-40's that Ganesh Baba fully entered the spiritual life, this time for good. Ganesh Baba spent the rest of his life living and teaching the ways of Kriya Yoga. He became an ordained monk under Swami Sivananda who gave him the name Swami Ganesh Anand. Sivananda's Vedantic philosophy, as well as that of Sri Aurobindo, the exciting new theories of modern physics, and the work of Carl Jung became the bedrock of much of Ganesh Baba's teachings.

Ganesh Baba received his second Kriya initiation from Sanyal Mahasaya, a direct student of Lahiri Mahasaya. His third Kriya initiation came from Sri Tripura, whose teacher was Sri Motilal, a disciple of Sri Yukteswar, reverently depicted in *Autobiography of a Yogi*. From these masters, Ganesh Baba received a broad and thorough training of various interpretations of Lahiri Mahasaya's Kriya Yoga. After leaving Shivananda's ashram, Ganesh Baba became the logistics manager of one of Anandamayi Ma's ashrams. At the time, Anandamayi Ma was one of the most revered spiritual teachers in India, and is still considered a saint. At it's height, her ashram fed thousands of people a day. Ganesh Baba thrived in this post for nearly a decade.

Ever the seeker, Ganesh Baba eventually felt himself drawn to the Naga Babas, the traditionally naked, dreadlocked, ash-smearing, Shiva-worshipping swamis who consider cannabis a sacrament. In an untraditional move for someone with the title of Saraswati, or "highly knowledgeable scholar," Ganesh Baba left Anandamayi Ma's ashram and became headman or Sri Mahant at the Shivite Anand Akhara in Bareilly.

When the sixties arrived, Ganesh Baba was in his 70's and dividing his time between the Akhara in Bareilly, Benares and Kathmandu. Many flower-child Westerners who traveled to India considered him the perfect teacher to share a chai and a smoke and learn about Kriya. While passing the chillum, Ganesh Baba always discouraged the use of marijuana and drugs for the young, believing and saying it should be reserved for those over 60 once their householder chores and worldly responsibilities were completed. Those who failed to take his advice and continued to get high were told to leave unless they carried their "spinal column as a column rather than an arch." Slouchers were not tolerated.



Ganesh Baba. Self-Realization Fellowship, Mt Washington. Los Angeles. Early 1980's.

By the late 1970's, it was clear the time had come for Ganesh Baba to travel to America to spread his unique interpretation of Kriya Yoga. Ganesh Baba spent about eight years in the United States, teaching Kriya as he moved around while keeping a home base in New York City and upstate New York, and visiting California, where he hobnobbed with Timothy Leary, Marilyn Ferguson, Gary Zukav and other leading-edge thinkers. Baba possessed undeniable charisma, and while his elephant-esque spirit trampled the egos of students and nay-sayers alike, he radiated glee and love, attracting a modest group of devoted followers willing to maintain ramrod straight backs.

Ganesh Baba's approachability was perhaps his most radical aspect. Never before in the history of Kriya had the basic teachings been so readily offered in such a streamlined, accelerated version. Before Mahavatar Babaji reintroduced Kriya to the world through Lahiri Mahasaya, the practice was held secret,

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reserved only for initiates—a group to which, legend has it, both Lord Krishna and Jesus Christ belonged. And while Mahavatar Babaji's instructions to Lahiri were to spread Kriya to Indian householders, the practices remained guarded, taught only to those who sought out these masters of the Kriya Yoga lineage. This made Ganesh Baba the ultimate outlier: not only did he teach anyone who wanted to learn, but he stayed up all night with them, lived in their houses, and tasked them with transcribing his teachings in a detailed, meticulous way.

While Ganesh Baba freely taught the curious and the committed, his teachings were not for the complacent, and those who came to Baba expecting an easy-going technique from a hip-and-harmless psychedelic guru were quickly turned away. His teaching style may have been revolutionary for a Kriya master but Ganesh Baba was strict, and his insistence that students maintain a bolt-upright posture at all times kept his following from growing larger than a modest handful of students. Those caught relaxing their posture in his presence were quickly reprimanded in no uncertain terms. And while many were drawn to the practices of Kriya through Ganesh Baba's charismatic and emphatic enthusiasm, those who became his most committed students remained because of the depth and effectiveness of the techniques themselves.

Baba believed that for Kriya Yoga and humanity to thrive in the coming decades, the practice had to be whittled down to its most essential parts. He made

the language of the teachings accessible to Western students, removing Sanskrit words for certain processes and replacing them with alliterative English phrases like Optimal Operational Order and Ultimate Universal Unity. While the language may have been full of colorful alliterations, it helped the concepts stick in the minds of his students. Ganesh Baba could easily incorporate Western scientific theory into Kriya philosophy and topics like the electromagnetic spectrum, Darwinism, Jungian archetypes and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras were all harmonious with Ganesh Baba's system. Even the physical practices themselves, condensed into a process known as the 4 V's, easily aligned with Baba's comprehensive synthesis of science, philosophy and conscious evolution.

For the past 40 years, a small group of Ganesh Baba's closest students have remained committed to teaching Kriya Yoga. They are scattered in Oregon, New York and France, where Baba went after leaving the United States in 1986. Because of the tutelage of Baba's original students, new generations of practitioners are beginning to learn and teach the introductory aspects of Kriya Yoga, fulfilling Ganesh Baba's request of his students to “leave footprints in the sands of time”. Kriya Yoga is a path to true knowledge, capable of helping humanity move through it's current state of affairs. And as Ganesh Baba taught, it is only through a collective awakening that love, the essence of nature and humanity, will truly permeate the human condition.

Dr. Keith Lowenstein is an integrative psychiatrist in Portland, Oregon and was Ganesh Baba's last formal student. They spent the better part of five years living together and teaching Kriya. It was Ganesh Baba who strongly requested Dr. Lowenstein to enter medical school.
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