

# Yoga: A Study of Consciousness

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Consider for a moment the question of exercise. What is exercise and why is it that Hatha yoga is not classed as exercise and why do yoga teachers seem offended at the mere association?

Exercise is described in the dictionary as the use and exertion of muscles and joints to achieve health. While Hatha yoga exercises the body this is generally seen as a by-product and not as an aim in itself - almost a distraction to the task at hand.

The period of classical yoga (Patanjali's period) considers emphasis on bodily postures as an insignificant precursor to the serious work - the definition being: "*Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of consciousness*" (Yoga Sutra I,2).<sup>1</sup> Yoga is seen as the study of the workings of the mind. The way the mind interacts with the senses, the breath and lays down emotional imprints. It is a study of consciousness. The way we are and how our mind works - in fact the way we interact with ourselves and with others.

How is it that the use of the body in asana can be said to contain the seeds for such a study?

An onlooker on asana practice sees a graceful set of movements containing coordination, poise, flexibility and stamina. But the same could be said of dance. What of the practitioner - what is the yogi involved in. Each asana is an attempt to place the body with a physical, mental and spiritual attitude.

As BKS Iyengar says "*Asana means posture, which is the art of positioning the body with a physical, mental and spiritual attitude. Posture has two aspects, namely posing and reposing. Posing means action. Pose is assuming a fixed position of limbs and body as represented by the particular asana being performed. Reposing means reflection on the pose. The pose is rethought and readjusted so that the various limbs and parts of the body are positioned in their places in a proper order and feel rested and soothed, and the mind experiences the tranquillity and calmness of bones, joints, muscles, fibres and cells.*

*By reflecting on which part of the body is working, which part of the mind is working and which part of the body has not penetrated by the mind, we bring the mind to the same extension as the body. As the body is contracted and extended, so the intelligence is contracted or extended to reach every part of the body. This is what is known as reposing; this is sensitivity. When this sensitivity is in touch equally with the body, the mind, and the soul, we are in a state of contemplation or meditation which is known as asana. The dualities between body and mind, mind and soul, are vanquished or destroyed."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Translation by BKS Iyengar, Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

<sup>2</sup>BKS Iyengar, The Tree of Yoga, p. 55-56.

Each time we stretch (or act) there is a response. Breath tightens or attention flickers or the mind reacts, and yogis have noticed this and responded not by trying to stop this interaction but to observe it - to study one's consciousness rather than to simply control it. The more focused and present one is to an act the less over-reaction is present. Acts done consciously are purer or cleaner if you like because they are less clouded or confused. As a result they lay down less imprints (*samskaras*) in the mind. This is the same in all activity in life. The busier we become within ourselves the more we lose sight of ourselves - pulled through our senses towards confusion and a loss of centre.

Daily practice operates on two levels - to have a daily practice is to have a place set aside in the day in which to be quietly internalised - a pause for breath in a world of seeming madness. This in itself should not be underestimated. Through the senses we become overstimulated, strained and driven. As Patanjali states "*the cause of pain is the association of the seer with that seen and the remedy lies in their dissociation*" (Yoga Sutra II,17). Practice is the art of breaking the habits created in a busy life - a moment of listening in a day of action.

Secondly, and more importantly for the serious student (*sadhaka*), practice is an attempt to observe one's own reactions to stimulus. Through regular practice the outward form becomes familiar (this is no mean feat, as the outward form itself is complex and demanding) and so the yogi enters the laboratory of the mind/body complex where the tools become repetition, patience and observation. The act of returning daily to dog pose for example proves conclusively the changing nature of our experience - the way sensation can change and be influenced by tiredness, interest, moods, thoughts and breath. Serious, long term inquiry leads the yogi to the inextricable fact of the influence of the senses and thought upon our perception of the world.

Of these three tools repetition is basic to the act of learning - learning to hone and refine one's senses by the act of returning time after time. Repetition defuses thought by confirming one in sensation. It defies the tendency of mind which wants to speculate instead of experience. Daily practice of *Sarvangasana* is quite different to your ideas about it.

Patience is a different tool. It implies waiting, but a better term would be listening. It is the art of waiting with open senses to discover or uncover hidden meaning or that which is not apparent to the casual observer. Hidden meaning is a principle implicit in yoga, the thought being that much of what yoga has to teach is not apparent to intellectual scrutiny and is contained in the examples which the practice reveals. Only through waiting and listening are we able to empty ourselves enough to learn. Patience also contains within it the seeds of burning zeal (desire to know or *tapas*). Those in a hurry are unlikely to undertake the inquiry as they will never fully develop the desire to understand.

All yogic practices contain the basic premise of observation or dispassionate observation. This is the art of noting or witnessing. We observe our actions and monitor any internal reactions trying to see them. The understanding being that cleaning the lenses through which we receive the world (the senses) will help us to see the nature of our thoughts as opposed to the thoughts themselves, and the entanglements of the world. Being present as an observer to the act rather than someone with a vested interest or participant. This does not always imply that we control our reactions. This itself may become suppression. It is the act of seeing them rather than manipulating them which is important. How many times have you been outwardly calm but inwardly seething for example.

But let us not just see the influence of the senses, the way in which they cloud our perception and make us unable to see clearly. How will we see more than the fact that we are vulnerable to the senses and the mind? Iyengar himself has been intimately involved in this inquiry - the practice must become a quest to see the roots of this influence. He is often seen as taking an asana to the extreme - "a physical yogi" keen on extending his limits and demonstrating his prowess; but this is not the case and is, in fact, a serious misrepresentation of his method. Just as some would sit in observation of the breath, holding the attention without wavering, his method asks the mind to remain focused and

to observe encroachments of sensation - meditation in action. Take *Salamba Sirsasana* for example, a minute or two is an effort, five minutes or more an act of stamina, but anything over ten minutes becomes an act of attention. Iyengar has not set out to arrive but to observe. His method takes the student from the act of doing into the act of being.

Iyengar's method is a testing of these principles in the rigour of asana. It is not a focus on the body or a perfecting of alignment but the ongoing inquiry into the nature of existence and the art of maintaining equanimity and emptying the mind of ideas - often described as the turnings of thought. What commences as an act of discipline and attention must become a study of consciousness; the observation of who we are and the way the turnings of thought bind us. To commence this stage the teacher must be left behind, as no outside force can interact at this level. BKS Iyengar says "*You have to become completely and totally absorbed, with devotion dedication and attention, while performing the pose. There should be honesty in approach and honesty in presentation. When performing a pose, you have to find out whether your body has accepted the challenge of the mind, or whether the mind has accepted the challenge of the body. Are you working from the body to get a factual feeling of the pose, or you doing the pose because you have read in books that it is going to give you such and such an effect? Are you caught in the web of what you have read, searching for the experience of someone else's written word, or are you working to know with a fresh mind what type of new light is cast on the pose by your own experience while performing it.*"<sup>3</sup>

*In addition to this total honesty, you have to have tremendous faith, courage, determination, awareness and absorption. With these qualities in your mind, your body and your heart, you will do the pose well. The asana has to enshrine the entire being of the doer with splendour and beauty. This is spiritual practice in physical form"*

The *asana* leads the *sadhaka* into the clear light of their own imperfection - their humanity if you like. As to attempt the *asana* invariably reveals the character of the practitioner and their own failings.

Mathew Fox comments that any practice which is perfection based is inherently flawed and is bound to fail as it is too rigid.<sup>4</sup> Yoga is anything but perfection based being intimately involved with the imperfection of the individual. when I practice I observe my failings, weaknesses, habits and character traits. To practice is to live in many ways in the full knowledge of who we really are instead of who we would like to be. We study ourselves. We study our consciousness.

Mr Iyengar says "*Study each aspect of an asana. It may be triangular, round, rainbow shaped or oval, straight or diagonal. Note all these points by observation, and study and act within that field, so that the body may represent the asana in it's pristine glory. Like a well cut diamond, the jewel of the body with it's joints, bones and so on, should be cut to fit into the fine framework of the asana. The whole body is involved in this process, with the senses, mind, intelligence, consciousness and self. One should not adjust the asana to fit into ones body structure, but mould the body to the requirement of the asana. Then the asana will have the right physical, physiological, psychological, intellectual and spiritual bearing.*

*Patanjali says that when an asana is correctly performed, the dualities between body and mind, mind and soul, have to vanish. This is known as repose, reflection in action. When the asanas are performed in this way, the body cells, which have their own memories and intelligence, are kept healthy. When the health of the cells is maintained through the precise practice of asanas, the physiological body becomes healthy and the mind is brought closer to the soul. This is the effect of the asanas. They should be performed in such a way as to lead the mind from attachment to the body towards the light*

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<sup>3</sup>BKS Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga*, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Fox, *Original Blessings*

*of the soul so that the practitioner may dwell in the abode of the soul.”<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup>BKS Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga*, p. 56.