

## STRUCTURING YOUR PRACTICE

In the coming months, the asanas will be presented to you grouped by their similarities. For example, you will receive groups of asanas focusing on hip external rotation, hip internal rotation, backbends, twists, etc. This is so you will develop a clear understanding of a particular action or movement.

The asanas that were given for month one comprise a broad collection of primary actions for mobility and stability. Together, they form a well-rounded practice. These asanas can provide warm-ups for your practice in the months to come. As you receive each month's lessons, see if you can associate which of the first month's asanas relate to the newly presented ones.

Often the asanas will seem very similar, changing mostly in their relationship to gravity. But this is an important change. As the body changes its relationship to gravity, different muscles and different perceptions are needed in order to create the same movements and actions. The body may be quite comfortable with an asana in one form and quite disoriented with basically the same asana when practiced in a different relationship to gravity. For example, dandasana (seated staff pose) is a relatively passive and stable asana. The same asana is also performed as a head balance with the legs parallel to the earth in urdva dandasana, upward staff pose (*Yoga the Iyengar Way*, p. 105). Remember that consciousness creates the predisposition of the body. As we change and minimize the bias of our body, our consciousness will also be transformed.

From the perspective of teaching and practicing, the monthly groupings will not constitute a complete and balanced practice by themselves. Remember that an asana session should include all of the following actions: primary openings in the hips, shoulders and spine; internal and external rotation of the hips and shoulders; flexion, extension, rotation and lateral extension of the spine. Even if there is a particular focus during an asana session, all of these actions should be covered to some degree, in order to create a balanced feeling in the mind and body by the end of the practice.

This concept of a balanced practice applies not only to opening areas of the body, but also to the attitude of the practice. If, for example, the practice is very heating, some cooling asanas may be employed to balance the energy. These choices will vary according to the time of day, as described in last month's Notes on Practice.



Though the asanas in the first month can be seen primarily as warm-ups, they can also be used to balance out the grouped asanas in the months to come. Discover which of the warm-ups best apply to the asanas for this month, and which of the warm-ups can best be used to round out your practice.



## MOVEMENT, ACTION AND STILLNESS

Hatha Yoga is both a physical and a mental discipline. The phrase “yoga asana” means a comfortable and stable pose held for the purpose of cultivating integration and wholeness, a yoking of the body and mind. Though asana practice is not literally movement-oriented, yoga recognizes that within the appearance of stillness there is action taking place. In other words, the place of balance is a dynamic, not a static, state.

In hatha practice, movement can be experienced on different levels. As a teacher it is important for you to observe what is taking place physiologically and psychologically. This requires an understanding of the concepts of movement, action, momentum, inertia, and stillness.

### **Movement**

Movement is the change of a thing’s position in space. In hatha this is the flexing, bending, and twisting of the body. This motion of the body must be perceived in relationship to something else in order for us to observe a movement. For instance, when you lift your arm to the side, the relative position of your arm changes in relationship to your torso. However, once movement stops, a dynamic state still exists. We call this action.

### **Action**

In the context of hatha, action refers to an isometric movement. An isometric movement is one in which there is no overt movement of the body in space, but there is still an activity of the musculature. Going back to our example, when you lift your arm out to the side, it is the isometric action in the muscle that holds it there. It is isometric activity that holds us upright while sitting or standing.

Physically, we associate the absence of movement with stillness. But even when sitting motionless, internal action is necessary to sustain balance. Though an asana may appear to be still or without movement, there are always varying degrees of internal action being performed.

Most of the instructions regarding the work we do in asana fall under this heading of actions. The quality or attitude of an asana can be determined by these internal, isometric actions.



Look at the nature and proportion of the muscular work which is required in your practice and where it can be released. Begin to assess the amount of concentration and intent required to perform an asana. These subtle actions of the body and mind are also quite dynamic. They will constantly change from day to day, morning to night, according to the amount of focus and time you invest in your practice. You cannot necessarily use yesterday's experience to determine your approach to today's practice. Memory can be a reference point, but awareness and focus are needed to be responsive to the present.

### **Momentum**

The way movements and actions are performed is determined, to a great extent, by two additional factors: inertia and momentum. In using these terms, we are largely talking about the predispositions of the body, our physical habits. The time and energy we have invested in a habit will determine the amount of momentum which is behind it. In order to facilitate a change in our body, we need to acknowledge what these habits are and how we can best use them.

While it is true that in yoga there is no such thing as a good habit, because "habit" implies a lack of self-awareness and volitional thought, we physically depend on certain habits in order to function in the world. Without them, we would not breathe or perform other actions necessary to sustain life. These habit patterns exist in the body, in the nervous system, and consequently in the musculature. Asana practice serves to reeducate the pathways in the nervous system to become accustomed to a more balanced condition.

### **Inertia**

Inertia is also a habit. The law of inertia states that an object at rest will tend to stay at rest, unless it is affected by some outside force. Therefore, pathways in the nervous system that have been unused for a long time may need to be reawakened. As with momentum, the length of time the pathways have been left dormant will determine the degree of intensity and duration required to open them again.

### **Stillness**

Stillness is a place in which there is no movement of the body, and the subtle action of the body and mind are quieted and focused. All of the facets of hatha practice — movement, action, momentum, inertia, and breath — can be employed to bring us to a state of dynamic stillness in body and mind which is conscious, comfortable, and stable.

We live in both physical and mental worlds. The word *hatha* has two syllables. Each syllable symbolizes one aspect of a pair of forces, such as mind and matter. *Ha* represents the Sun, our physical, active and masculine nature; *tha* symbolizes the Moon, the mental, passive, and feminine side of our being. Hatha Yoga is a dynamic system of practices which brings these elements into harmony and integration. Yoga is a method that seeks to balance these elements into an awareness of their intrinsic unity.

