

DEVELOPING YOUR ASANA PRACTICE

As we have discussed in class, the key to your success in becoming an effective hatha yoga teacher lies in developing and maintaining a 6-day-a-week asana practice. Here are some guidelines for developing an asana practice that will help you to embody the practice as taught in this course. In addition to these guidelines, it is important that you read and understand the text in the 'Notes on Practice' section of your binder written by Swami Vyaktamananda, Mahaswami (Kim Schwartz).

To begin with, start to use the five stages of asana within each asana you practice. The five stages will become habit in no time. The information that follows is taken from Goswami Kriyananda's book, *The Spiritual Science of Kriya Yoga*.

The Five Stages of Every Posture

Every posture has five stages in it. Practicing the yoga postures is similar to playing a musical instrument. To a very large degree, it necessitates timing and attunement to a feeling. If you ask a musician how long a full note is, he cannot give you an exact, definitive answer. Every musician knows the length of a note is a matter of its relationship to other notes. In short, timing is proportional and relative. It is a feeling state, close, but different in each master's mind.

In the same way, the feeling state within a particular posture is subjective, but very closely linked to that posture. From that feeling follow the five stages which make up the completed posture.

1. The first step is mentally attuning to the posture. Here the mind establishes a feeling state appropriate to the posture. For example, when a tennis player is about to serve, he must attune his mind to a particular attentiveness. He mentally goes through the delivery of the ball before actually tossing it up. This collectiveness, this attentiveness, is the feeling that was spoken about. The feeling will be different with the different postures. The closer the postures are to each other, the closer the feeling will be.

This feeling state before going into a posture is important. If you hold a positive feeling, it will cause the mind states relating to the posture to become balanced. This feeling state draws the energies into balance. It



produces a quietness and brings energies to the specific energy center (chakra) according to the pose performed.

2. The second step is flowing into the posture. Move into the posture as gently, as smoothly, and harmoniously as possible. If you have ever watched how a cat stretches, you will perceive the ease and grace with which you should go into any posture. The flow or sweep into a posture is one motion. There should be no jerkiness.
3. The third step is holding the posture motionless. This is the most important. People who move awkwardly have an extremely difficult time holding the mind still ... concentration is almost impossible. People who are always fidgeting and/or always making extraneous movements, have their energies scattered. There is a relationship between bodily stillness and mental equilibrium.

The secret of the posture is the hold. It is in the hold that the bodily energies are brought into balance. It is within the hold that the life energies are lifted and sent to the chakras, healing karma imbalances. The mind always follows the feelings. If you feel anger, holding to that feeling causes the energies to become more out of balance. Eventually they become so far out of balance you will be compelled to think, speak and act in a negative way. But reversing the process, and holding to a balanced quietude, will cause the anger to soften or lift. When this feeling is held in the hold of the posture, it affects your subconscious mind. Thus, it has far stronger and longer lasting positive effects. It is also at this stage that the kriya kundalini ascends into the various chakras.

4. The fourth step is sweeping out of the posture. This should be done with one motion. Struggling to get in or out of a posture produces jerkiness and consequently an imbalancing of the energies. This defeats the purpose of the poses. In short, you should flow as smoothly out of the posture as you flowed into it.
5. The fifth and final step is total relaxation. This rest period is the second most important stage, for it is here that all the energies are balanced, reducing the emotions and producing positive feelings.

Although the five stages are indicated, they are actually one total harmonious whole. There should be no ruptures or awkward movements between any of the stages.

Finally, there is a great difference between doing calisthenics and the yoga postures. Calisthenics is aimed at rapid contractions in order to enlarge and strengthen the muscles. Yoga stretches the muscles, toning and then relaxing them. It is, therefore, essential to learn to differentiate between stretching and straining. When the stretch becomes a strain, it is no longer yoga.

Structuring Your Practice

You can use the following as a template for structuring your practice.

Four Phases of an asana practice session

Centering – This is a transitional stage when you are transitioning from previous outward activities to your asana practice, signaling to the mind and body that your focus and awareness are shifting inward. Focusing your awareness on the breath either in a simple seated asana, or lying down in savasana, will begin to draw the energies of the mind and body inward, towards center.

Warm-up – Once you have spent time centering, begin to warm-up the body. Use this part of the practice to neutralize the spine, to stabilize and begin to open the hip and shoulder joints and to warm the muscles up. You may wish to use asanas from Unit 1 of the text.

Escalation – This part of the practice should consist primarily of standing poses. You may choose to either focus on ‘internally rotated’ or ‘externally rotated’ standing asanas (one category or the other) from Units 2, 3 and 4.

Resolution – This phase of the practice serves to prepare the body for savasana and includes the practice of savasana. For example, including a forward bend at this point will have a quieting effect on the mind and a cooling effect on the body. If you were to include a back bending pose at this point in the practice, it should be a simple backbend or a supported backbend rather than a muscular, heat and energy producing asana. If you were to include a twist in this phase, it would be best to use a supine twist rather than a standing twist for the same reasons.



Try to include any primary movements of the spine that were not included in the previous three phases of your practice. The primary movements of the spine are: flexion (forward bending), extension (back bending), lateral extension (side bending) and rotation (twisting).

The Resolution Phase should always end with savasana or a similar symmetrical, restorative asana.

You may ask the question, how much time should I spend in each of these phases? It depends on the amount of time you have available, which will most likely vary from day to day.

Here is an example to give you an idea of how to divide your time until you are more familiar with the template. In time, the practice will flow more naturally and you won't be so concerned about how to divide your time into the four phases.

30-minute practice session

Centering – 5 minutes Warm-up – 5 minutes Escalation – 10 minutes

Resolution – 10 minutes

Points to Remember

1. Your practice should be enjoyable. Practice in a way that will leave you looking forward to your next practice session. Asana practice should become something you 'want' to do rather than something you 'have' to do.
2. Think in terms of consistency in practice. The goal is to develop a pleasant, 6-day a week practice that is suited to your lifestyle and daily schedule. Some days may present more time than others, and some days you may need to make time to practice. Try not to skip a day even if you only have a brief period in which to practice. It will help the mind and body to build and maintain a pattern; a habit.
3. Always include time to 'center' at the beginning of the practice and time for savasana at the end of the practice. Depending on your time-frame, these may be very brief periods within the practice, but in many ways they *are* the practice. Remember that the periods of non-movement or stillness within the practice hold the greatest benefits to the mind and body.

4. The manner in which we practice affects our mind state. For instance, the practice has the ability to slow or increase the mind's rate of activity, which will, in turn, effect the body as well. A key Ayurvedic principle to keep in mind is: Likes increase, dislikes decrease – meaning that when we do the same thing it will give us more of the same, and when we take an opposing action, or a 'dislike', it will decrease the effect we are experiencing, moving toward balance. For example, if the mind is particularly active, allow the breath to lengthen, and the body movements to be slow and deliberate. If the mind is sluggish, bring more energy to the breath, and let the body's movement increase in energy as well- of course, not to be confused with forcefulness.
5. Be mindful to attach movement to breath rather than breath to movement. Allow the breath to initiate the body's movement. The difference between the two is subtle – explore both ways to understand this concept. Each movement of the body should be linked to an inhalation or an exhalation.
6. Keep the throat, heart and abdomen soft and responsive to the breath. The inner-body is lengthened and the limbs are active while holding an asana still, but the inner-body, while maintaining its length, is fluid and open so the breath can move freely. The expression of the breath in this manner can be felt as air passing gently through water as the body is comprised mostly of water – the inner-body, this water element, ultimately, should not offer resistance to the expression of breath.
7. The breath should be effortless regardless of whether or not you are expressing it in a particular manner, such as utilizing a 3-part breath, or when allowing the breath to breathe itself. When expressing the breath in a particular manner, think in terms of conscious direction of the breath's expression rather than forceful effort. Effortless breath is about letting go and allowing for the breath's expression rather than physically forcing its expression.
8. Absorb yourself in the expression of the breath. While holding a pose still, or after releasing an asana, even if only truly for a breath or so, focus on the breath undistracted by thought – observing the expression of the breath in

the body as it flows in and out. This is yoga, or the yoking of the mind and body by way of the breath.

9. Hold each asana only as long as you can maintain the fluidity of the breath and the integrity of the body's alignment. Each asana has a cycle – creating or entering the asana, sustaining or holding the asana and allowing the asana to dissolve or releasing it. Cycles share a commonality in their cyclic movement, but no two cycles being exactly the same, each time you practice the experience will differ in some way. One day you may hold Virabhadrasana I for 5 breaths and the next you may hold the same asana for 2 or 3 breaths. Try to become aware of, and open to this change. Let the breath be the guide as to when to release an asana – ideally, just before the breath begins to lose its fluidity. Knowing or sensing this point will come more easily with practice and observation. When an asana is held beyond this point, it becomes more effortful and begins to build tension in the mind and body. This is a movement away from yoga, and this movement away from yoga cultivates no benefits for the mind or body – it can be said to be *himsa* or harmful to both mind and body.
10. It is important at this time that your asana practice is comprised mostly of asanas taught in this course. You may, of course, include some of your favorites that are not included in the course, but it will be most useful to you to practice the asanas we are learning in class. Remember you can only truly teach what you truly know and have made your own through practice. This is how the teachings are embodied. It is not so important that you memorize the text or that you practice exactly as you are taught in class, but that you come to your own understanding of what is being taught. This is making the practice your own.
11. Please keep in mind that when asana is taught, for the most part, it is broken into fragments. During personal practice, there should be less fragmenting and eventually, no fragmenting – simply, the flow of the breath, the movement of the body and the mind absorbing itself simultaneously in the two – a oneness, which is yoga.
12. Above all else, enjoy your practice!



NOTES ON PRACTICE

Yoga is a mental posture, a state of equilibrium and stillness. It is not a destination to be reached, it is a place where you simply are. Only through practice (*abhyasa*) are the fruits of yoga obtained. The method is the goal.

The Difference Between Effort and Intensity in Yoga Practice

The levels of intensity in yoga practice are defined as mild (*mrdu*), average (*madhyama*), keen (*adhimatra*), and vehement (*tivra*). The intensity of your practice will determine the quality and depth of your results. Although this would seem to indicate that the greater the physical effort you exert, the better, the answer is not that simple. The essence of yoga is balance and integration. In yoga, intensity is not measured by effort. Intensity is measured by the degree of focused awareness you bring to the physical aspects of your practice. This emphasis on focus and awareness, rather than just exerting physical effort, is what distinguishes this program's approach to Hatha Yoga.

How to Determine the Proper Intensity of Practice

In their enthusiasm for results from hatha practice, many people confuse intensity with effort. Let's use asana as an example. If you work an asana with too much effort, injury or overwork may occur. However, if you work the asana with moderate effort, but with intensity or focus, you will achieve the desired result. Through your practice and reflection on the aftereffects of that practice, you will begin to discern the level of intensity that is comfortable and effective for you. The physical body is an excellent barometer to measure the attitude you bring into your practice. Are you pushing yourself too hard, or are you sustaining the intensity of your practice with balance? Once you gain a clear awareness of your intensity level, you can apply this awareness to other aspects of your practice.

How to Determine the Duration of Practice

Let's take this understanding of intensity further. We could express intensity as a part of a mathematical formula: intensity multiplied by duration will equal the resulting force ($I \times D = F$). A modest amount of intensity over a long period of time can yield the same results that a great deal of intensity will yield over a shorter period of time. Therefore, to achieve a given result, the relationship of intensity and duration needs to



be proportional. If your observations reveal that only a small amount of intensity is possible for you without creating difficulty, then the duration must be proportionally increased in order to still achieve the desired result. Since most people cannot easily sustain a high degree of focus or intensity of practice, the natural variable to increase is duration or length of practice. Increasing our effort is not always wise. For example, you cannot force a hamstring to lengthen any sooner than it should. You will only injure yourself. Therefore, if you are trying to stretch a tight hamstring, duration would be the better variable to work with in asana practice.

There are two aspects to duration. One is the length of time involved, and the other is repetition. The true depth of an asana is most likely to be experienced as the asana is performed for greater lengths of time. So if an asana can only be sustained with integrity for a short period of time, then repetitions are necessary to achieve the desired result. Integrity means careful attention to structural alignment. In the long term, this attention to detail will be the most accurate and direct tool for affecting the flow of prana, the life force.

The Importance of Repetition

Repetition is always important, even if the asana is held for a longer duration. By repetition, we mean either a certain number of repetitions of a particular asana during your daily practice, or repeating the asana every day. It is a good idea to resume practice of an asana before its aftereffects have dissipated completely. In other words, it would be better to have a moderate practice every day than an intense practice once a week. This will help to keep a flow going. Using a moderate daily practice with the addition of an intense practice once or twice a week could also be an effective approach. The only way you can discern what works for you is, of course, through practice, observation, and reflection. The most vital thing to remember is that your practice should always be enjoyable and relaxing.

Choosing the Best Asanas For Your Practice

The timing of your daily hatha practice is a personal choice, though what you practice will change. If you practice in the morning, you may want to start gently with some of the warm ups from month one. The session may then escalate with standing asanas and back bends, and transition through some neutral asana, like dandasana, before finishing with twists or forward bends. Always make time for savasana or an equivalent restorative asana at the end of your practice. The same approach may be employed for an afternoon practice though less warm up may be needed. An evening practice would typically be less muscular or heating than mornings or mid-day. If back bends are performed in the evening, they would best be performed in a supported, restorative fashion. Inversions, supported twists, and forward bends would also be good, as they can be more quieting and inturning.

Asana Practice and Food

It is suggested that you practice asana on a reasonably empty stomach. What you have eaten and the predisposition of your constitution will determine how long you need to wait after eating to practice. If you have a strong digestion, less time may be required. Another consideration is how long you should wait after practice before eating. The greater the intensity of your practice, the longer you may want to wait. If you have given yourself a long savasana (15 minutes or more), you may require less time.

Through all asana practice, move slowly and with awareness. Remember, the articulation of the asana is much more relevant than trying to stretch. Let your practice expand to become a part of your lifestyle. The joy experienced in any aspect of life, however seemingly mundane, will be enhanced as you become steeped in the practices of yoga. Properly performed, yoga will bring you greater health, happiness, and awareness. *Consider your practice a gift.*

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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 falls 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 re-educate 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 symbolizing 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.

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ACHIEVING RANGE OF MOTION THROUGH ASANA PRACTICE

When people talk about yoga, what they are usually referring to is Hatha Yoga. When they think of yoga, they think of stretching and relaxing the body to develop greater flexibility and range of motion. But contrary to what many people think, increasing your range of motion through asana practice is not achieved by stretching. As a matter of fact, sensations commonly associated with stretching can actually micro-tear the muscle fiber. Overworking muscles can also cause them damage. The micro-tearing which results from overworking and over-stretching muscles creates an overabundance of short muscle fiber. These fibers create muscles which are always in a partially contracted state and can never fully relax. Muscles that are constantly contracted actually inhibit range of motion.

Proper Alignment

Chronically hard muscles are very fashionable these days, as evidenced by the amount of time many people spend at the gym. However muscles that never relax not only have a limited range of motion, they are also more susceptible to injury. The structural strength of the body rests in the bones — not in the muscles. The muscles are arranged to support the natural alignment of the skeletal structure. The purpose of muscle is to hold the bones in proper alignment so they will bear the weight of the body. If the bones are well aligned, the muscles need to do relatively little work. But if the skeleton is out of alignment, some muscles will overwork to compensate, while others will be under-used. Over time, muscles that are habitually overworked lose their ability to relax easily and they become tight. Muscles that are under-worked become weak and deficient in tone. Both of these conditions contribute to limiting your range of motion.

Strong muscular actions do not need to produce muscular tightness. If proper alignment is sustained during an action, there is no need to avoid muscular work. Actions performed with proper alignment permit the muscles to release and to soften afterwards. This is what you want to achieve with your yoga practice — muscles that can be strong and then completely relax. However, if a posture is performed with poor alignment, the muscles will not completely relax when the actions are completed. This cre-

ates tightness over time, and limits your range of motion.

How to Lengthen Muscles Without Force

To increase range of motion through hatha practice, perform the asanas with proper alignment to a point just before stretching occurs, and then breathe into the hold. Feel how each inhalation creates length and openness, and how each exhalation releases the gripping in the muscles. Lengthen the exhalations to release even more. Sustain the asana as long as it can be held comfortably with proper alignment and then release it. This is the method you want to teach your students.

Children typically have a tremendous range of motion and boundless energy. These two qualities often go together because range of motion facilitates an unrestricted flow of prana. Children also have wonderful muscle tone without tension, though it is interesting to note how soon they start to lose this tone in modern technological cultures. Remember there is a difference between muscle tone and muscle tightness. The definition of muscle tone is a muscle that can be strong when it needs to be strong and then completely relax.

As we age, our bodies become the result of all that we have thought, felt and done during our lives. It can be an interesting and enlightening experience to reflect on what has occurred in our lives from childhood on. These experiences, and our reactions to them, have created the people we are and the bodies we inhabit. Yoga is a practice that can work through this somatic memory, retraining our body.

Working with Students

Some of your students will have joints that are very loose, and others will have bodies that are very tight. It is tempting to think of people who are very flexible as having an advantage for practicing yoga, but this is not always the case. A loose-jointed person may have fewer restrictions in their range of motion, but this can also create more difficulty in knowing where their body parts are in relation to one another. Although a tight body is more prone to muscle injury from overstretching, a loose-jointed body is more prone to joint injury due to a lack of appropriate muscular support, which is a far greater concern. The potential for injury to occur due to hyperextension is also increased.

Yoga is balance. The student with too much muscle tension is as out of balance as the student with too little. From the perspective of teaching yoga, a loose-jointed stu-

dent is often more challenging to instruct than a tight bodied student. This is because loose-jointed people are capable of many more movements, yet do not necessarily possess any greater body-awareness.

From the perspective of most students, having a tight body is frustrating at first. But with practice they will increase their range of motion. In fact, over time, due to their limitation in range of motion, a person whose muscles are tight can develop a very precise awareness of his or her body. The challenge in teaching loose-jointed students is finding ways to create boundaries that will keep their joints accurately aligned.

To achieve greater range of motion through asana practice, what we want to do is work the asanas in the direction of developing proper alignment. In this way, any chronic tightness or gripping in the muscles will release naturally. At the same time, this allows muscles that have been under-used to begin to strengthen. Developing range of motion through proper alignment and muscle tone is one of the principles that differentiates asana practice from most other systems of body maintenance.

Alignment and Prana

A well-balanced asana practice will create more energy than it uses. Although *well balanced* can refer to many different elements of practice, here it refers to the alignment of the body. If one side of a joint is closed and the other side open, this affects the movement of prana. The side that is too open is likely to dissipate prana while the side that is too tight is likely to restrict its flow. If the joint opening is balanced and well supported by the musculature, the movement of prana will be well balanced.

Range of motion is created through proper alignment and muscle tone — not by muscles that are over or under-developed. Good muscle tone controls and directs prana in the most balanced way. This is why in the ashtangas of Patanjali, asana and pranayama are paired. They are both systems of controlling and directing prana.

Range of Motion as a Metaphor

No discussion of yoga is complete without considering the spiritual aspects of practice. One could say that there is also a psychological and spiritual range of motion. This relates to our ability to adjust, adapt and respond to life. The patterns we create either limit us physically and emotionally or serve as the foundation for our unfoldment and awakening. Flexibility is important, and so is the need to align and support ourselves



spiritually.

The intensity of your practice is determined by the focus and awareness you sustain while you practice — not by effort or force. Yoga is not about twenty minutes in the morning or twenty minutes at night. It is a way of life, an attitude. The goal of yoga is to balance and align your body, mind and spirit harmoniously and to sustain that balance throughout the other phases of your life. This requires discipline and patience. To attempt it with force will create imbalance and injury. To embody yoga it needs to be practiced with clarity, wisdom, and gentleness.



QUALITIES OF ALIGNMENT IN ASANA PRACTICE

Alignment is the essence of good asana practice. Many times we encounter an asana that seems to require tremendous strength. Though strength is required, the real challenge is mostly one of alignment. The bones are the source of structural stability, not the muscles. If we can use the muscles to bring the bones into proper alignment, the muscles have to do relatively little work. The better the alignment, the less muscular the asana will feel. By opening the joints and releasing the chronic grip of the muscles, we can align the bones more accurately. Then even the most complicated and demanding asanas will be more easily accessible to us.

In Hatha Yoga, alignment has several levels, the most obvious being the muscular and skeletal levels. On a subtler level, however, we also need to develop visceral alignment, and on the subtlest level we want to achieve pranic alignment.

Muscle and Joint Alignment

The opposing sides of the joints should be as parallel as possible. If one side of a joint is too open, the other side will be too short. The side that is too open risks overstretching the ligaments, and the side that is too short risks compression. What we are working toward is neutrality. In most asanas the joints will not be parallel or symmetrical, so we need to perform isometric actions to work the joints in the direction of symmetry. This practice helps to keep the joints open and mobile while maximizing their stability.

Opposing muscle groups also need to work in balance. Muscles contract when they engage. It is common to have to engage one muscle group for support so that an opposing muscle group can lengthen. For example, in most asanas where hamstring length is required, the quadriceps will need to be contracted. The quadriceps, which support the front of the leg, permit the back of the leg to release.

Muscular strength is the result of the prana moving freely, not of increasing the size of the muscles. You do not need large muscles to be strong. Despite the size of the muscles, strength comes from prana. For example, when you first wake up in the morning, you do not generally have access to the same degree of strength you will have later

in the day. The muscle mass has not changed, only the available prana.

The alignment of the torso is not a simple musculo-skeletal matter. At a minimum, the torso needs to be seen as having a front, a back, and an inner or visceral body. In joint alignment, we are always working toward neutrality. This is also true of the spine. Whether the spine is in flexion, extension, rotation or lateral extension, the isometric actions of the body are in the direction of the natural curves of the spine.

To better understand muscle and joint alignment in the torso, let us use the example of a forward bend. A forward bend requires that the back body be longer than the front body. However, we do not want to compress the front of the body as we bend. As we try to keep length in the front of the body, we often end up tightening the back muscles, yet these are the very muscles that we are trying to soften and lengthen. This is where the visceral body needs to work. By cultivating inner body length and integrity, the front body can remain open while the back muscles soften and lengthen. The same concept can be applied to a back bend, twist, or lateral extension.

Visceral Alignment

By developing accurate musculo-skeletal alignment, the visceral body is permitted to function optimally. As our yoga practice develops, we begin to feel the alignment of the visceral body as much as that of the muscles and bones. Awareness of the visceral body begins to teach us how to work the muscles and bones. We begin to see how the lungs are moving, how the digestive organs are being affected, and how the circulatory and nervous systems are being affected by our practice. Sensing alignment from the visceral body requires a greater degree of inner quiet, because joints and muscles can be seen and felt, whereas the visceral body can only be felt. The less struggle in the outer body, the more easily we will be able to sense the inner body.

Pranic Alignment

As we practice asana, the alignment of prana is the most important, the subtlest, and the most difficult to perceive. The movements and actions of the muscles and bones need to be nearly effortless and the visceral body very soft before we can truly begin to feel the movement of prana. This is the real model from which all the rest of the alignment parameters are established. However, due to its subtle nature, we usually cannot start here. Because of the way our awareness functions, we need to work from the physical body to the subtle body. Since we must start where we are, we most often begin with the outer body because it is the most familiar to us. This is the reason that asana precedes pranayama in the eight limbs of the system of Patanjali.

THE DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF ASANA

Patanjali refers to asana in his second book of the Yoga Sutras. The second book is called *Sadhana Pada* or *Section on Practice*. In Book Two, Sutra 46, Patanjali defines asana as having two qualities: stability and ease or comfort. Sutras 47 and 48 then elaborate on the purpose of asana.

Sutra 46: *Sthira sukham asanam.*

sthira = stable or steady

sukham = ease or comfort

asanam = pose

Translation: Asana is a pose held with stability and comfort.

The First Quality of Asana is Stability

Sthira means something that is stable, firm and lasting. In the classical yoga system, the primary purpose of asana practice is to prepare one's physical body for practicing the last five limbs of the system, such as meditation. Meditation is an effortless practice and therefore the body needs to remain effortlessly still.

The sutra says nothing about becoming flexible. Flexibility is important because without it the bones will not align properly, which allows the muscles to relax. However, the openness achieved by the joints and muscles balancing one another must be created with stability or *tada*, like the mountain.

This focus on stability raises a question. Why do we seek such great range of motion in asana practice? The answer brings us back to our equation: ($I \times D = F$) intensity times duration equals force. The greater our range of motion in all directions and the greater our stability, the greater will be the duration of time we are able to sit comfortably with a neutral spine, whether that be in meditation or at our desk. The less stability we possess and the more limited our range of motion becomes, the more quickly our body will fatigue when sitting in meditation or anywhere else.

The Second Quality of Asana is Comfort

The second quality referred to in the sutras is *sukham*. This means something that is happy, comfortable and filled with delight. In many physical disciplines, the phrase



“no pain, no gain” is often used. In yoga, however, the opposite is true. If there is pain, it is likely that you are doing something wrong. Especially at the beginning, there can be a great deal of effort and perhaps even struggle in asana practice, but there should not be pain. Joint pain, for instance, is a very specific indicator that something is misaligned. Properly practiced, yoga asana brings not only health but happiness. As our body and the prana that animates it are brought back into balance, we should only feel greater and greater equanimity and joy.

The struggles we do experience in hatha practice are often our body’s reluctance to relinquish a habit. Since all asana practice should be in harmony with the natural movements of the body, the habit we are encountering is probably not harmonious with the nature of the body. At any stage of practice, the asanas should feel as though they are nurturing our whole being. In the same way that a cold, though uncomfortable, is the body’s struggle to overcome a virus and return to health, struggle in asana practice can be thought of as the body trying to return to balance.

Interestingly, there is a whole field of medicine dedicated to sports-related injuries. Not only is there no field of medicine needed for yoga, but yoga can be a therapeutic remedy for many types of sports injury. Injury from asana practice is only possible as a result of inaccurate or overly aggressive work. The cure is simply developing better alignment, comfort, and stability in your practice.

The Purpose of Asana

Sutra 47: *Prayatna saithilya ananta samapattibhyam.*

prayatna = to sustain the effort needed to complete an endeavor

saithilya = minimize

ananta = unlimited, boundless, eternal

samapattibhyam = encountering, meeting

Translation: By sustained practice [of asana] as effort is minimized, we encounter the eternal.

Sutra 48: *Tatah dvandvah anabhighatah.*

Tatah = then or from this moment forward

Dvandvah = dualities or oppositions

Anabhighatah = cession or removal of disturbances

Translation: ... From this point on, [the practitioner] is undisturbed by dualities.

Sutras 46-48 read: "Asana is a posture held with stability and comfort. By sustained practice, without effort, one encounters the eternal and then is undisturbed by dualities."

In yoga, that which is eternal is spirit. It is the immortal part of you. Duality consists of opposites such as day/night, happy/sad, birth/death. All is change in this world. Yoga points out that the changing nature of the universes in which we live should not disturb us. As we come to know that which is eternal within us, we begin to see, to understand, and to live in harmony with the changing order of Life. To do this requires wisdom, self-discipline and patience, or as Patanjali would say: "constant practice and continual detachment."

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