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“Any person who is not lethargic can practice yoga, be he young, old very old, sick or weak. One who is intent on practice will obtain yoga, not one who is idle. Yoga is not obtained by the reading Scriptures, nor by wearing the dress of a yogini, nor by talking about it. Practice alone is the course of success.”

These classic lines were written in the “Hatha Yoga Pradipika” by Svatmarama and express that yoga is a path of action which does not require renouncing the world but constant attention to practice. In this way he acknowledges that our present actions have future results both in the world (physically) and emotionally. Patanjali calls this Samskara - emotional imprints in our sub conscious. Through our actions we can move towards greater clarity, or confusion - it is through our acts that we will achieve samadhi not through our beliefs.

Kriyayoga is the term Patanjali gives at the beginning of the second chapter to describe the nature of practice. Kriyayoga - the yoga of action, consists of 3 tiers or layers - that a practice should contain three qualities - work (Tapas), self study (Svadhaya) and surrender (Isvara Pranidhana).

While these three tiers are levels on which we can practice they should not be seen as stages. BKS Iyengar has shown in his book “the Tree of Yoga” that the 8 limbs of yoga are not stages to be approached one after another but represent 8 limbs of a tree which feed the whole. So too practice exists on each of the 3 tiers concurrently.

The following excerpt is taken from the introduction to “Light on the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali” (LYSP) by BKS Iyengar and presents the 8 limbs of yoga into their groups as represented by Kriyayoga.

“Kriya means action, and kriyayoga emphasises the dynamic effort to be made by the sadhaka. It is composed of eight yogic disciplines, yama and niyama, asana and pranayama, pratyahara and dharana, dhyana and samadhi. These are compressed into three tiers.

The tier formed by the first two pairs, yama and niyama, asana and pranayama, comes under tapas (religious spirit in practice). The second tier, pratyahara and dharana, is self-study (svadhyaya). The third, dhyana and samadhi, is Isvara pranidhana, the surrender of the individual self to the Universal Spirit, or God (Isvara).

In this way, Patanjali covers the three great paths of Indian philosophy in the Yoga Sutras. Karmamarga, the path of action is contained in tapas; jnanamarga, the path of knowledge, in svadhyaya; and bhaktimarga, the path of surrender to God, in isvara pranidhana.”¹

In this article I would like to examine these 3 qualities and where they exist in our practice of asana.

Tapas

Tapas is the quality of application, focus and effort. It is the heat we apply to go forward, to experience. Tapas is cleansing and purifying. It requires that we overcome obstacles within ourselves -the 9 obstacles to practice are disease, inertia, laziness, doubt, heedlessness, indiscipline of the senses, erroneous views, lack of perseverance, backsliding. Classes are based on this level, students are taught to inquire and define through asana and pranayama practice. The teacher informs the student on how to perform the asanas, refine their efforts, identify and overcome obstacles within themselves.

¹ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons edition 2002 page 6

“The conjunction of effort, concentration, and balance in asana forces us to live intensely in the present moment, a rare experience in modern life. This actuality, or being in the present, has both a strengthening and cleansing effect: physically in the rejection of disease, mentally by ridding our minds of stagnated thoughts or prejudices; and, on a very high level where perception and action become one, by teaching us instantaneous correct action; that is to say, action which does not produce reaction. On that level we may also expunge the residual effects of past actions.”²

Through practice, we become present in our acts and reshape the way our mind absorbs experience - instead of interpreting things which happen to us through the filter of our mind (views formed from past experience) we move to experience them without the veil of thought. An example of this is where we have an experience in the past of someone abusing our trust - this often makes us wary of future interaction with others, but in the extreme we become unable to trust anyone; Our actions are limited by our beliefs.

In tapas we experience directly. In doing so we burn off past impressions which limit us, and our ideas of what we are capable of change. Through action (tapas) we can refine our consciousness -change and grow. This is the first tier and can not be transcended.

Svadyaya

The second tier or layer - self-study is seeing ourselves in the performance of asana. Through practice we must come to see ourselves and what we bring to our practice; habits, prejudice, beliefs which all affect our progress along the yogic path but also affect us from day to day. Moods and emotions affect us in our practice and even our ability to get on the mat so that we need to cultivate dispassion and equanimity in our practice or become paralysed by our thoughts and actions.

Self study is the quality which allows us to put aside judgement in our moment to moment performance of asana and pranayama to observe our interaction with the pose. In this way it is a much more flexible quality than tapas - more watchful and forgiving than judgemental. Often students merely repeat the instructions of their teacher when they practice. This mental set of words is taken as practice but is only the shell of practice. It is only when you are in the experience of asana, rather than the instruction, and you experience the doing and your interaction with the doing, that time disappears. Think of when you practice and one or two hours disappears, that is absorption. It is through repetition that we break down thought and become more intimate with the asana, more present to the sensations in an asana; more present to the moment. And in that moment time and the sense of “I” disappear.

Self study is the key to make practice meaningful.

Isvara Pranidhana

It is translated as surrender to God. There is much discussion about whether Yoga is therefore theistic with many commentators arguing for and against^{*3}. Regardless of this debate which I leave for others, it is the quality of surrender which is essential.

Practice commences with the desire to progress and refine both in a physical and spiritual sense but over time this quality changes to commitment to a process of change - an unfolding of that process. We eventually learn to surrender to change and allow it to take us where it will. Often we desire change but are equally terrified by it when it doesn't fit our vision, so our desire is conditional. Surrender is the quality of giving in to the unfolding of practice - it is a maturing of practice. It is a humbling of the yogi before the vastness of the subject and the immensity of the task they undertake within themselves to live this life of yoga.

² Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons edition 2002 page 32

³ Theism “Discipline and Freedom” by Barbara Stoller- Miller

The following groupings represent examples of kriyayoga within our practice.

The Choice of Asanas

Within the practice of Asana these 3 qualities of kriyayoga exist. Below I list an example of each -

Tapas - Urdhva Danurasana (focus and refinement of effort) as in all the back bends.

Swadhaya - Sirsasana (learning to be at the centre).

Isvara Pranidhana - Paschimottanasana (at between 10-20 minutes) letting go of the chatter of mind. It also takes one to surrender the ego to the Mother Earth.

When we look in to the preferences around practice we observe the nature of the student. For instance the student who prefers forward bends will often structure practice to encounter these poses more often - searching for respite and stillness. In doing so they will avoid the stronger more demanding aspects of the difficult standing poses or backbends for example. Just as the 3 Gunas (qualities of Action, Inertia and luminosity) are 3 parts of a whole so the 3 aspects of kriyayoga are each part of the other so that to be overdeveloped in one aspect is to diminish the availability of the others. Too many forward bends make backbends difficult to do. Balancing a practice is not merely doing equal amounts of everything but recognising yourself in the practice and not making decisions based on desire or aversion.

Beyond studying the quality of each asana there is also the application of the quality to an asana to see what is uncovered- so that Trikonasana for example is done with the quality of tapas, svadhaya or isvara pranidhana to uncover it's hidden qualities.

Within an Asana

Kriyayoga exists in each asana and can be explored through the stages of.

Entering the asana - shaping and defining it.

Accepting the asana - digesting the asana by placing the asana in the body in such a way for the body to accept the stretch.

Surrendering to the asana - to end the struggle of refinement and questing and to be totally in the experience of the asana.

If there is no reflection in the asana then constantly adjusting merely provokes more thought - more definitions and ideas. The layers must exist in each asana for the pose to be defined and send the experience via the nerves back to the brain to know the result.

Qualities of Practice

We see Kriyayoga also across the spectrum of practice where all our actions can be divided into still another grouping of Work, Timings and Passives. These are qualities of application where -

Work - (enquires into asana) where the asana is studied,

Timings - where we hold the asana to study the responses within the body/mind,

Passive's - where we study the release of the fibres.

A full set of standing poses done without breaks or shifting concentration (jumping into and out of Tadasana), develops concentration and focus and is an example of *work*.

Timers are often used to remove the aspect of choice or whim from the asana. This helps the yogi to remove the fluctuating nature of the mind that always wants to seek comfort; by resolving to stay the yogi encounters the experience of the asana in the body and mind. Used in Sirsasana, Sarvangasana, long time forward bends for example.

Passives are best done without being at the edge of ones physical limit. Whereas in *work* you define the pose *passives* are done at a level where you can stay - wait for the pose to come to you. Dissolve yourself in sensation. Examples are Supta Baddha Konasana, Rope Sirsasana, Rope Adho Mukha Svanasana, Ardha Halasana.

Too often the student simply exists at one of the layers of practice without actively seeking out the others or even being aware of them. Just as a practice should develop across the groups of asanas it should also develop across the qualities. Recognising ones own tendencies helps to define the nature of what we do in our practice.

Kriyayoga and Samyama

Samyama is the term Patanjali gives to the last 3 limbs of Yoga at the beginning of the third chapter. The 3 qualities of kriyayoga correspond to samyama -

Dharana (Concentration),
Dhyana (Contemplation or Meditation), and
Samadhi (merging with the object of meditation).

“Patanjali begins the third chapter with dharana, concentration, and points out some places within and outside the body to be used by the seeker for concentration and contemplation. If dharana is maintained steadily it flows into dhyana (meditation). When the meditator and the object of meditation become one, dhyana flows into samadhi. Thus dharana, dhyana and samadhi are interconnected. This is called by Patanjali samyama. Through samyama the intelligence, ego and sense of individuality draw into their seed. Then the sadhaka’s intelligence shines brilliantly with the lustre of wisdom, and his understanding is enlightened. He turns his attention to progressive exploration of the core of his being, the soul.”⁴

While these are the last 3 limbs of Yoga and are said to be the results of practice and not practices themselves they also reflect the layers of Kriyayoga. Tapas is defined in concentration (dharana) - where concentration is purposeful, svadhaya in contemplation (dhyana) - where consciousness is constant or reflective, and isvara pranidhana in samadhi where the conscious “ I ” dissolves or surrenders.

The beauty of yoga is in the way these philosophical ideals are observable within the performance of each asana. Through the practice we strive for the ideal of yoga and are able to experience this ideal in the practice.

The following excerpt is included from light on Yoga Sutras

Actions

“Actions are of 4 types. They are black, white, grey or without these attributes. The last is beyond the gunas of rajas, tamas and sattva, free from intention, motivation and desire, pure and sourceless, and outside the law of cause and effect that govern all other actions. Motivated action leads eventually to pride, affliction and unhappiness; the genuine yogi performs only actions which are motiveless: free of desire pride and effect. The chain of cause and effect is like a ball endlessly rebounding from the walls and floor of a squash court. Memory, conscious or sublimated, links this chain, even across many lives. This is because every action of the

⁴ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons edition 2002 page 34

first three types leaves behind a residual impression, encoded in our deepest memory, which thereafter continues to turn the kamic wheel, provoking reaction and further action. The consequences of actions may take effect instantaneously, or lie in abeyance for years, even through several lives. Tamasic action is considered to give rise to pain and sorrow, rajasic to mixed results, and satvic to more agreeable ones. Depending on their provenance, the fruits of action may either tie us to lust, anger and greed, or turn us towards the spiritual quest. These residual impressions are called samskaras: they build the cycles of our existence and decide our station, time and place of our birth. The yogi's actions being pure, leave no impressions and excite no reactions, and are therefore free from residual impressions.⁵

Desires and Impressions

Desires, and knowledge derived from memory and residual impressions, exist eternally. They are as much part of our being as is the will to cling to life. In a perfect yogi's life, desires and impressions have an end; when the mechanism of cause and effect is disconnected by pure, motiveless action, the yogi transcends the world of duality and desires and attachments wither and fall away."⁶

Notes

The concepts in this article are drawn from to "Light on the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali" by BKS Iyengar
For further study read Kriyayoga pages 6, 103 . Samyama pages 31, 178- 184. Samskaras page 13, 36-37,
3 Gunas page 125 -126.

⁵ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons edition 2002 page 40

⁶ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons edition 2002 page 41