

Let me begin by asking a question – what is an asana?

Is it a position of the body, an alignment? Is it an object of concentration? Is it a line of energy as argued by Joel Kramer in his seminal article, ‘Yoga as self transformation’?

It is all of these things mentioned above, but it is also more. The longer I study yoga as a practice, the more aware I am that each asana is different, not only in its physical attributes but in what it requires from me.

As a beginner, when we first do Savasana it happens *to us* – we lie out as instructed by the teacher and allow our body to relax with the instructions. Effectively, we are guided through the process by someone else. It is done to us by the teacher. This is useful in that it gives an experience of where and how the pose exists, but it does not teach us how to do the pose. When we go home we practice by mentally repeating the instructions to ourselves in an attempt to arrive at the pose. Most students do this throughout their practice – they repeat the teacher’s words, thus, in effect, replicating the teacher’s practice. It would be better to have the experience of the asana in class, then return to that experience in your own practice. You should study the *state* of an asana not only its ‘points’. Don’t study the road-map, but study the experiences it leads to, and find your own way there.

Most students allow the teacher to define their experience for them. Whilst this level of practice is important for the student to come into contact with the asanas, by its nature it is limited to the definitions the teacher sets; it limits by exclusion. As a practice matures it must interact and discover intimately each experience/asana. To explore the asana in an unconditioned realm, away from the teacher is essential. This is not to say that practice formed by the teacher is less or more pure or even tainted in any way but for the purpose of self study (swadhaya) it exists outside oneself – formed elsewhere and therefore a contradiction to learning from experience. The teacher’s input should be to help the student immerse themselves in the experience of the practice, not to stand between the student and themselves. The student must accept and reject, and thus modify and re-reflect the teachers input until the experience of the practice is their own¹.

State of the mind

Much of our lives have been taken up with reading input and impressions which come in through our senses – sounds, touch, sights, smells, etc, all interpreted by the mind. We carry conversations within us; these often contradictory voices and emotions vie to be heard and so we talk to ourselves constantly to confirm our actions and intentions. We separate out and clarify important inputs and directions from the sensory excess through repetitive internal monologues. If you watch the way your mind works you will see that it most often follows familiar cycles or patterns of thought. It follows its expectations and searches out those things which confirm and conform to its beliefs – it repeats a thought or idea again and again until there is little possibility of anything else. For many of us the world becomes a self-fulfilling experience: “things never go right; we always fail at everything we do; I’m not good at that.” Fear or arrogance colour our perception. In this way the mind is circular and affirming.

If you anticipate resistance when you practice, your mind searches for it, and at its onset focuses on that discomfort, drawing you into it; you pursue it. This repetitive habit of mind searches out sensation which affirms your expectations and locks onto these sensations, thereby bringing them into reality. This could be termed a ‘conditioned mind’, and with it change is only a limited possibility. In such a state yoga practice may become simply an attempt to confirm your thoughts and biases; a way of holding onto your beliefs. When practicing, observe the way the mind interacts with sensations and points. For example, in a long timing forward bend, the mind often locks on to a discomfort – obsesses about it, can’t move away from it and develops it into a torment. Or, alternatively, the inability of the mind to perceive the back leg in Ardha Chandrasana because there are too many other strong sensations and things to *do* in the pose. Each is an example of an inability to choose the point of attention – both are examples of the inflexible nature of the *habit* of thought.

¹ read BKS Iyengar – Tree of Yoga, chapter : *the fruit*.

When practicing, tremendous clarity is required to choose where the attention is focused and not allow it to be consumed by expectation. This is a discipline of staying clear to the asana's full potential – *broad attention*, if you like. Finding the balance between purpose in the asana and clarity (or emptiness) is difficult in that they are complimentary but opposing forces. For this work the point base (the foundation of points that define each pose) that we work out of is an excellent way to observe your habits and develop the Skills of “Broad attention, Immersion and Directing the attention” mentioned in the previous essay *Twin Pillars of Yoga*.

Concentration through warm-up / Concentration through reorganization.

In a previous article I discussed the difficulty of linking attention through hard work. When practicing daily I encounter the challenge of keeping a freshness of enquiry – the “beginner's mind” (Zen mind Beginners mind by Shunru Suzuki Roshi). Often I carry the stiffness of yesterday; pressures and distractions of life make it a challenge to engage and so there is a temptation to simply exercise, or to mechanize practice. This situation can result in me pushing the body to work in an attempt to concentrate. I attempt to warm up physically and mentally. Over the years I have been caught endlessly by trying too hard which has resulted in lack of interest from overwork – a sort of overload of yoga. It's a common experience. There are other days, however, when a practice which commences with resistance can be turned around to become something special, something of clarity and crispness. This transition from disinterest to engagement is important and of more interest than simply the ‘benefit’ of getting my practice done for the day. These days when practicing I attempt to study this transition, in order both to observe its mechanism, and to influence it.

When you watch small children, they live in a mode of enquiry – the discovery of the world around them. It's a beautiful quality full of energy and questions. When walking with my kids, if they complain of tiredness they can often be distracted by efforts to reconnect their attention to something up ahead, or suggestions such as, “let's see how many birds we can count between here and home”. Their energy is directly related to their attention and interest. It's the same with practice. If I can bring my mind to a state of interest the body will follow. This requires that I go slowly, seeing where my mind is today, giving it the space to look – without using force. A quality of ‘questioning’ rather than ‘doing’, which transforms the mind via freshness of enquiry. What's interesting in this approach is that I have been required to change something in my mental state – to reorganize the nature of my concentration. At first this is haphazard and erratic, not something I can do at will; but just as doing Savasana in class teaches a quality of experience which I must find a way to repeat, so too a clear, pure concentrated practice points out where to aim. I look into the way I link my attention to the asana. There is no formula to follow – merely the moment of watching that interaction of concentration, attention and interest.

Reshaping attitudes

Asana is a reshaping of the body into the alignments, but it is also a reshaping of our attitudes. Each asana requires a slightly different approach or type of focus. For example, Sirsasana and Sarvangasana are similar in that they are sustained asanas requiring stamina and concentration, and yet on another level they are different to each other. We accept as a given the principle that to stay in an asana, we must become proficient in the muscles and alignment. Yet at a certain level, I am aware that this is not enough in itself; something within me has to align with the pose. I call this a reshaping of attitudes, because it's like a shift in my mental state or the ‘stance’ from which I do the pose. I have to let go of long-held beliefs and boundaries to go outside myself in order to change, yet these conditioned habits are the very things I use to confirm myself – the way I feel normal. To answer this question is easier than the conundrum suggests. If a Yogi is only obsessed with the apparent contradictions of practice he can never go on to seek clarity. Trying to be rid of our habits is an impossible task – like trying to be someone else – it's better to see the influence of these patterns, and the way they limit and dominate our existence, so that in time, as we become more intimate with them, we change our attachment to them; we can let them go more easily. Consider the impact of this idea closely for a moment – what does it really mean to your practice? Normally we approach the asanas by trying to *do* them; to get the body to take the shapes, stretches and alignments. This will bring us in contact with our resistance to change, and so we learn about ourselves through this type of practice. But there is another type of practice that I'll call *being* the asana, where I set up in Sirsasana, for example, by taking up the position with care, alignment and conscious attention. Instead of trying

to *do* the pose, I try to touch that experience within me that *is* Sirsasana. I take up a stance, in other words, a position of mind, an attitude of mind, appropriate to holding the pose and then see where this leads. The attempt to defeat the asana by *doing it* is doomed to fail because it denies a recognition of the individual whose habits and conditioning pervade all his or her acts. A practice of yoga is about *me* not *it*. It is for this reason that it has been consistently argued that yoga cannot be learned without a teacher as it is the teacher's role to help the Sadhaka (student) see their own conditioning.

Still point

To clarify this principle we could use the term *still point* to describe the quality referred to here. Position yourself in the asana, don't aim at the pose – be it – go to the center of that experience you know of as the pose and stay there at the core without wavering in your intent, and observe anything that pulls at you from that still point. Adjustments are only made when you've gone outside the still point; that is, adjustments to return to the *still point*. At its core the question of this type of practice is, does the asana affect us or does the asana require us to change for us to do it. Students often struggle to stay in the pose by focusing on the points when doing their practice. Their intention is to learn by focusing effort and will. Unfortunately, this will only work to a degree, as it is only part of the equation. Through study of anatomy we know that muscle has only one action, if you send an impulse to it, it contracts, if you remove the impulse it releases. In yoga though, we identify three states of muscle – contraction, *non contraction*, and extension. While this may seem pedantic there is an important distinction here. If the muscle is contracted it cannot lengthen so that the first act in the asana is to let the muscle go (to stop it triggering). Once achieved the uncontracted state of the muscle can be extended into new territory. This uncontracted state between contraction and extension is critical to the development of the asana. It is through conscious awareness that the yogi keeps the muscle in the uncontracted state. Studying the points alone is the equivalent of studying extension – it misses the uncontracted state of attention, and the clarifying observation of contraction.

Take Sirsasana again as the example. When the pose is in perfect balance no effort or energy is required, it is only when we move away from that point that the muscles engage. This poise could be called a conscious pause where neither effort nor thought exists. A kumbhaka in the asana described by Iyengar as effortless effort. This is the still point of practice described earlier.

So what, exactly, is reshaping attitudes through asana? Put simply, it is the act of learning from practice to reevaluate our assumptions and expectations (or attitudes), similarly to the way we attempt to reshape our physical form in the asana. To do this requires that we both see ourselves, and not be overly fixated on 'points', as if they contain answers in the form of information. The challenge here is to go beyond the boundary of mind set through habits established in past experience, and through our expectations. The aim of practice should be to practice asanas as attitudes of mind. Take up a stance, position the mind and observe its interaction with the object – the practice. Without this principle, practice becomes a reinforcement of long-held beliefs and assumptions about the world. We live in the past and only listen to those aspects of our experiences that conform to our ideas. Ultimately it is the transformative process that yoga seeks to represent and not a set of beliefs or doctrines.