

Unconditional practice.

If your practice is defined by an idea of what is right, it will ultimately fail—not because it lacks sincerity, but because it is bound to a fixed point of view. Practice, in its most profound sense, is not an effort to conform to correctness, but a journey to discover what is real. When we begin with the assumption that there is a ‘correct’ asana, a proper form, or a perfected method, we enter the domain of conditional practice—a practice shaped by goals, standards, and preconceptions. But whose standard of correctness are we fulfilling? Is it a reflection of something your teacher once said? Is it drawn from a book, an image, or the demonstration of a more advanced practitioner?

Correctness, while useful in guiding beginners and establishing foundational principles, can become a limitation if it solidifies into an ideal that constrains our experience. We must question whether we are measuring ourselves against an external authority or engaging in a genuine enquiry of our own. Learning to practise is not about rehearsing ideals—it is about developing the capacity to sustain enquiry. And enquiry, if it is to be sincere, must remain open-ended.

Conditional practice arises when we impose an outcome onto the process. It aims for results: greater flexibility, better balance, improved breathing, or a state of calm. While these aims are not inherently wrong, they subtly shape the direction of our attention. We begin to value some experiences and dismiss others. We praise effort that leads to visible progress, and we denigrate the quieter moments of difficulty or fatigue. Conditional practice is guided by discrimination of what is deemed desirable, and it functions by exclusion—it resists those elements of experience that do not align with its goals.

The danger in this is that practice becomes a form of affirmation rather than investigation. When we practise only to confirm what we believe, we fail to see what lies beyond those beliefs. Any fixed idea of practice is necessarily timebound. It is shaped by our current understanding, which itself is built from the cumulative residue of past experience. It reflects what we know *to date*. But the living process of practice reveals itself in change—in insight that disrupts what was previously known, in the emergence of a new capacity, or the surfacing of an unfamiliar sensation. Thus, to remain fixed in an idea is to place a limit on what practice can reveal.

This timebound nature of practice is sharply evident in the case of balancing in an asana such as Adho Mukha Vrksasana—Handstand. One may try for months, even years, to attain balance. One may learn from skilled teachers, follow detailed instructions, apply both gross and subtle adjustments. Still, the outcome may elude us. Each attempt is recorded by memory (*smṛti*), which tells us, “I always fall.” The repetition of this memory begins to define our identity as a practitioner: “I am not someone who can balance.” Yet everything can change in a single instant. A momentary shift—a flicker of lightness or poise—transforms the experience. That brief contact with balance doesn’t merely alter our understanding of the asana, it alters our perception of *possibility*. What was once deemed impossible becomes tangible, not because the body has changed dramatically, but because *we* have changed.

In that moment, something in the *citta*—the consciousness—opens. This is the core of skilful practice: the capacity to suspend judgement and remain present to what *is*, rather than what we expect or desire. It is the cultivation of *unconditioned attention*, a refined awareness that notices without interference, that explores without projecting outcomes. It does not seek to confirm its own narrative, but rather allows those narratives to dissolve.

To understand this fully, we must distinguish between two interwoven processes within practice. The first is discipline—the training of the mind, referred to as *manas* in Yogic terminology. In its untrained state, *manas* is restless. It jumps from thought to thought, led by attraction and aversion. It seeks novelty, pleasure, and affirmation. Practice disciplines *manas* by giving it a point of focus. Whether through seated pranayama, flowing sequences, or the intensity of a held asana, the aim is the same: to direct and anchor the mind in the present. In doing so, the mind

begins to develop steadiness. We test our perceptions against experience, and slowly our understanding becomes more reliable. But this understanding is still *conditioned*—it is built from what we know, and it shapes what we are capable of seeing.

The second process, which we might call *unconditional practice*, emerges only after the first has been sustained. It is not the abandonment of discipline, but its transcendence. Where the first process organises the mind, the second begins to observe the deeper structure of consciousness itself—*citta*—and the modifications that arise within it, known as *vrttis*. According to Patanjali, there are five *vrttis*: correct perception, misperception or illusion, conceptualisation or delusion, sleep, and memory. Through deepening practice, the practitioner begins to discern how these movements that distort or *colour* our experience, and thus begins the work of *un-colouring* them.

A practitioner who moves toward unconditional practice ceases to rely on external authorities for validation. They recognise that even their own insights are timebound—that perception is filtered through layers of past conditioning. And so, they practise not to accumulate knowledge but to witness the unfolding of reality without imposition. This kind of knowledge is experiential, and it cannot be pre-formed. It arises spontaneously, born of presence. In this way, it fulfils the Yogic aphorism that describes practice as the pursuit of *reality as it is*—not as we wish it to be.

The conditioned mind, shaped by memory and desire, constantly seeks security in the known. It gravitates toward what is familiar and resists the unknown. It uses effort and concentration to narrow the field of awareness in order to hold on to what it recognises. But true understanding lies beyond the borders of the known. It emerges when we release the urge to control, when we stop asking practice to deliver a specific result.

To practise unconditionally is to step into the unknown each time we enter the practice environment. It is to bring a freshness of perception to each movement, each breath, and each pause. It is not passive or vague; rather, it is marked by discipline—a discipline that comes from attentive presence rather than force or defined by ideal forms. It is not bound by technique, though it may use technique. It is not indifferent to the body, though it is not limited to the body.

Such practice is creative. It listens, responds, and evolves. It is neither complacent nor ambitious. It recognises that every sensation, every difficulty, every unexpected moment can become the basis for deeper enquiry and understanding. It does not define experience in terms of right or wrong as even failure is part of the process and a path to understanding.