

The Traditional Practice of Yoga

Activating the super-conscious level of the mind is the goal of Yoga. This is done by viewing and releasing the conscious and subconscious tendencies of thinking and feeling and coming into a state of pure being. For the Yogis, the subconscious mind serves as a gateway to the super-conscious. But for people driven by the instinctive mind, the subconscious is clogged by unprocessed thoughts, feelings, and impressions. The subconscious mind is not seen clearly by most, but feared. People do not realize that it is nothing more than the fear to face the thoughts and feelings in the subconscious mind which creates their personality, their likes and dislikes, and which motivates all their beliefs and actions. The layer of unprocessed impressions within the subconscious mind obscuring the super-conscious potential of the soul could be likened to the view through a window being obscured by dust and dirt. When a person views any thought or feeling without judgment but with mindful awareness, those impressions pass easily from the mind. When a person responds to the thoughts and feelings arising from experiences with any attachment, resistance, judgment, fear, aversion, desire, or confusion, by the power of these attachments, a person will not see the experience for what it is but instead turn away. When a person judges, they attach. When a person has any attachment to the thought and feelings they experience, the unprocessed impressions will be trapped in the subconscious mind. All that is good, yet the mind makes certain experiences desirable and others undesirable. It is in perception only that the concepts of good and evil exist. The goodness of the Divine creator is abundantly manifest in all that is, because His nature is good. Yet when the objects of the world are viewed through the veil of judgments, attachments, likes, and dislikes, they will not be seen as they are, but in the light of these attachments. To the person who holds many unconscious attachments in the subconscious mind, the world will appear as these attachments and the nature of his own mind will assume the form of these as well. For a person whose mind is full of fear, the objects and events of the world will appear menacing and he himself will react to situations in a cowardly manner. For a person whose mind is full of anger the world will seem cruel and unjust and his own mind will be full of rage. For the meditating Yogi who has revealed and released the many layers of subconscious impressions, the world appears radiant and pure. He sees that the Goodness of God is manifest in all things and his thoughts, words, and deeds are a pure manifestation of God's grace.

Yoga is the process of redirecting consciousness from the external to the internal. Physical activities direct consciousness to the outer mind and world. Meditation and Yoga directs consciousness inwardly. When a person feels the physical body and experiences the world through its senses, his consciousness is said to dwell at

muulaadhaara. When a person detaches from the physical form and enters into the realm of feeling and thought, then the consciousness begins to ascend through the chakras. When a person rises beyond the level of duality and experiences himself to dwell in all things throughout the universe, consciousness is said to be in the Sahasrara chakra at the crown of the head. Yoga is the process of bringing awareness from the physical level of things to the highest, and subtlest spiritual level of being. This is changing one's focus, not changing how things are in the world, but only how they are perceived by the Yogi. Like a person changes the focus on a pair of binoculars to see an object that is closer or further away, the Yogi attunes his awareness away from the physical body and the material realm, to the body of pure golden light which dwell in heaven and is United with the Formless source of all that is. The Yogi knows that heaven and hell are not eternal destinations for the soul upon death, but realms of being which people choose to encounter as their souls desire in life.

Eight Limbs of Yoga

Asana

Modern teachers of Yoga have placed a great emphasis on the physical practice of aasanas or Yoga postures, but the traditional Yoga texts have all placed a relatively small emphasis on Asana. Though modern practice often reduces Yoga to a series of physical exercises, it is important to remember that in the larger system of Yoga, asana is only one of eight successive steps. Without the two preceding and requisite steps of Yama and Niyama, asana will not yield its results. Also without the 5 following steps (pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi), asana will not lead to realization.

The quintessential text on Yoga, the Yoga Sutras contains only three lines about aasana which say:

sthira sukham aasanam . "Sit still (steadily) in a comfortable (or easy) position."

prayatna shaitilya anantya samaapattibhyaam . "From (sitting still in a comfortable posture) effort is released and relaxation attained. This causes the practitioner to encounter the infinite."

tataH dvaMdvaah nabhighaataH . "Then the body is free from dis-ease and decay and impervious to extremes (like heat and cold, pleasure pain etc)."

Traditionally the purpose for aasana practice within the broader practice of Yoga is training the body to sit still without discomfort so that the subsequent practices may be

conducted without disturbance from the discomfort of the physical body.

In recent times certain healers like Kṛṣṇamācārya have applied the practices of traditional Yoga for the purpose of healing various dis-ease conditions in the body. Ayurveda has used knowledge of Yogasana for healing various dis-eases for centuries. Though the aasana practices of traditional Yoga can be used for healing all manner of dis-ease when their effects on the human body is understood well in the context of the traditional anatomy and physiology of Ayurveda and Yoga, it should be understood that this is not the highest purpose for which the aasanas have been revealed. Most Yoga teachers have not studied Ayurveda or the healing effects of Yoga in depth, and do not have sufficient knowledge to heal dis-ease through Yoga practice. Such knowledge requires years of study and practice to grasp, but in the West, people have not had an appreciation for even the true healing power of aasana, and have not applied themselves to this study. For this reason, most teachers of Yoga will make only the most basic health claims about Asana practice: it calms the mind, eases stress, increases strength and flexibility. These same claims can be made of the modern practice of pilates or nearly any other exercise. In its modern practice, Yoga has been completely stripped of its healing power, not to mention its higher spiritual application. Whereas it may take many years of intense study to truly understand the healing potential of Yogasana, it requires even more effort to learn the spiritual application of the asanas. The study of Yoga as a spiritual science for Self-realization is said to require many lifetimes of study to master.

Yoga is an ancient system released from the higher awareness of the Sages and is capable of healing all dis-eases and more importantly leading human consciousness to Divine realization. These traditional applications are becoming quickly forgotten as a disproportionate emphasis is being placed on the practice of asana and the practice becomes more externalized. Yoga leads to Realization because its practice gives a person control of the instincts of the mind and ego, yet for this to work a person must have a humble attitude and practice Yoga with a spirit of detachment. The practice must be done slowly, carefully, gently, and with mindful awareness. The path of realization requires many years of dedicated and unrewarded practice before it will yield any noticeable results, though healing effects may be experienced much more quickly when asana is practiced in the traditional ways. In the quest for realization, it can be possible to practice for many years without any outer sign of advancement, yet a person must persist in their practice with great faith and discipline.

People in the West have become accustomed to seeking instant gratification, and so it is not surprising that most Yoga practitioners in the West have shied away from the

higher applications of Yoga and focused instead on elaborate and excessively physical asana practices. When practicing asana only for its physical effects on the flexibility and strength of the body, this practice is useful. But there should not be any mistake about this, this practice is not Yoga in a traditional sense. In the West there are many Yoga teachers who are more like contortionists or acrobats. They perform great feats of flexibility, agility, and endurance. From a perspective of traditional Yoga, these practices are completely useless because they are not necessary for health or realization and they serve mainly to give strength to the ego and to increase the attachment to the physical body. This modern practice has arisen from the materialism of Western consciousness and the lack of mystical teachings in the mainstream Western religious traditions. It is a modern and distinctly bastardization of the ancient practices revealed by the Sages. To really learn the mystical science of Yoga, it is necessary to find a realized Guru and to humble oneself at the feet of that Guru and to become still. Yoga is not the practice of standing on one's head, but of learning to bow it at the feet of the Lord who dwells in all.