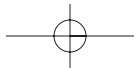
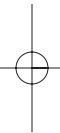
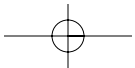
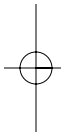
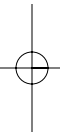
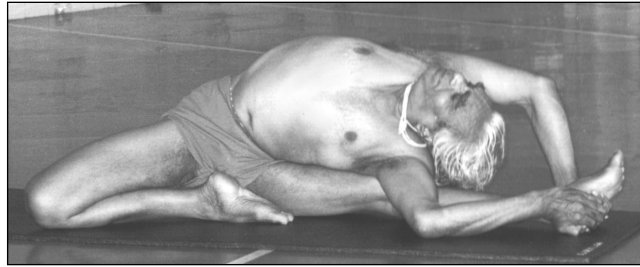




LIGHT ON LIFE





Parivrtta Paschimotanasana*Chapter 1*

The Inward Journey

Spiritual realization is the aim that exists in each one of us to seek our divine core. That core, though never absent from anyone, remains latent within us. It is not an outward quest for a Holy Grail that lies beyond, but an Inward Journey to allow the inner core to reveal itself.

In order to find out how to reveal our innermost Being, the sages explored the various sheaths of existence, starting from body and progressing through mind and intelligence, and ultimately to soul. The yogic journey guides us from our periphery, the body, to the center of our being, the soul. The aim is to integrate the various layers so that the inner divinity shines out as through clear glass.

Kosas—The Sheaths of Being

Yoga identifies five of these different levels or sheaths of being (*kosas*), which must be completely integrated and in harmony with each other in order for us to achieve wholeness. When these subtle sheaths are in disharmony, they become sullied like a mirror reflecting the tarnished images of the sensory and sensual world. The mirror reflects what is in the world around us rather than letting the clear light of the soul within shine out. It is then that we experience disease and despair. True health requires not only the effective functioning of the physical exterior of our being, but also the vitality, strength, and sensitivity of the subtle levels within.

Most of us think of our “body” as simply our physical form—our skin, bones, muscles, and internal organs. For yoga, however, this is only the outermost layer of our body or *annamaya kosa*. It is this anatomical body that encompasses the other four subtle bodies, or *kosas*.

The *kosas* are like the layers of an onion or the Russian dolls where one is nested within the other. These include our energetic body (*pranamaya kosa*), our mental body (*manomaya kosa*), our intellectual body (*vijnanamaya kosa*), and ultimately our blissful or soul body (*anandamaya kosa*). When these bodies or sheaths are misaligned or clash with one another, we inevitably encounter the alienation and fragmentation that so trouble our world. When, on the other hand, we are able to bring the various sheaths of our body into alignment and harmony with one another, the fragmentation disappears, integration is achieved, and unity is established. The physical body (*annamaya kosa*) must connect with and thereby imprint upon the energetic and organic body (*pranamaya kosa*), which must, in turn, accord with the mental body (*manomaya kosa*), the mental body with the intellectual body (*vijnanamaya kosa*), and the intellectual body with the blissful body (*anandamaya kosa*). Likewise, if there is no communication be-

tween the blissful body and the physical body, then the blissful body cannot bring its illumination to the motion and action of the physical body, and there is darkness in life and not Light on Life.

The demarcation of the different sheaths is essentially hypothetical. We are unique and integral. Nevertheless, in order to achieve the integrity and wholeness we desire, there must be communication from the inner to the outer and the outer to the inner as each sheath blends with the next. Only then are we bound together as one functional human being. If not, we experience dissolution and fragmentation, which make life uncomfortable and confusing.

It is essential for the follower of the yoga journey to understand the need for integration and balance in the kosa. For example, the mental and intellectual bodies (manomaya and vijñanamaya kosa) must function effectively in order for us to observe, analyze, and reflect what is happening in the physical and energetic bodies (annamaya and pranamaya kosa) and make readjustments.

The physical body in other words is not something separate from our mind and soul. We are not supposed to neglect or deny our body as some ascetics suggest. Nor are we to become fixated on our body—our mortal self—either. The aim of yoga is to discover our immortal Self. The practice of yoga teaches us to live fully—physically and spiritually—by cultivating each of the various sheaths.

I hope as you read on you will begin to understand that if you too live and practice yoga in the right way and with the right attitude, far greater benefits and more radical changes will take place than mere physical flexibility. There is no progress toward ultimate freedom without transformation, and this is the key issue in all people's lives, whether they practice yoga or not. If we can understand how our mind and heart works, we have a chance to answer the question, "Why do I keep making the same old mistakes?"

It is the map the ancients left us that gives us the form for the chapters of this book. Their knowledge and technology make up the con-

tents. The human being is a continuum—there are no tangible frontiers between the kosas as there are no frontiers between body, mind, and soul. But for convenience sake, and to aid us on our journey, yoga describes us in terms of these discrete layers. We should imagine them as blending from one into the other like the colors of the rainbow. Following this traditional description of the five different bodies or kosas, we have divided this discussion into five central chapters of “Stability: The Physical Body” (annamaya kosa), “Vitality: The Energy Body” (pranamaya kosa), “Clarity: The Mental Body” (manomaya kosa), “Wisdom: The Intellectual Body” (vijnanamaya kosa), and “Bliss: The Divine Body” (anandamaya kosa).

In these chapters we discuss the various stages of the Inward Journey as we discover Nature (*prakrti*), which includes the physical body, and Soul (*purusa*). As we explore the Soul, it is important to remember that this exploration will take place within Nature (the body), for that is where we are and what we are. Our specific field of exploration is ourselves, from skin to unknown center. Yoga is concerned with this fusion of nature and soul because this is the essence of human life with all of its challenges, contradictions, and joys.

Living between Earth and Sky

As I have said, we human beings live between the two realities of earth and sky. The earth stands for all that is practical, material, tangible, and incarnate. It is the knowable world, objectively knowable through voyages of discovery and observation. We all partake of this world and its knowledge through the vast store of accumulated collective experience. There is one word for all this. It is Nature. In Sanskrit, Nature is called Prakrti. It is composed of five elements, which we characterize as earth, water, fire, air, and space (previously called ether). Consequently and sympathetically, the body is made up of these same five elements, which is why we also use the term prakrti for the body. When

space explorers bring back rocks from the moon and scientists study them, they are studying Nature. When we calculate the temperature on the surface of the sun, we are observing Nature. Whether we study planetary Nature or cosmic Nature, it is Nature. Such study is endlessly fascinating because Nature is full of variety. Not only is it full of variety, it is also constantly changing, so there is always something new to see. We too are part of Nature, therefore constantly changing, so we are always looking at Nature from a different viewpoint. We are a little piece of continual change looking at an infinite quantity of continual change. Small wonder that it gets quite exciting. The most important thing we can learn about Nature is the inherent and innate laws by which it functions.

Even hundreds of years before Patanjali wrote the *Yoga Sutras*, Indian yogis were trying to see some pattern in the seemingly chaotic fluctuations of Nature. The infinite variety of natural phenomena gives an appearance of chaos, but, they asked, is it possible that the laws that govern the unending turbulence of nature are orderly and comprehensible? And if we can grasp how they work, would it not be possible for us to emerge from chaos into order? All games are meaningless if you do not know the rules. When you do, they can become very good fun. You still take a few knocks and lose a few games, but at least you are participating; you are playing the game. Yoga says you are playing the game with the body and self. By playing you can learn the rules, and if you observe them, you have a far better chance of success in life as well as of gaining illumination and freedom.

So humankind stands with its feet planted squarely on the earth, as in *Tadasana* (mountain pose), and its head in the sky. But what then do we mean by the sky? Clearly I do not mean the earth's biosphere, or anywhere that physically exists, however far away. I could have said, "Our feet on the earth and our head in the heavens." Many languages do not have two separate words for sky and heaven as English does. The word heaven is useful as it suggests something that is not

physical. This opens up possibilities: a) that it is perfect, as nothing physical can be perfect since all phenomena are unstable; b) that it is Universal—i.e. One, whereas Nature is many as we see from its diversity; c) that it is Everywhere, Omnipresent since, not being physical, it is not limited or defined by location; d) that it is supremely Real or Eternal. In yoga the body is held to be of real substance, whereas the changing of ourselves and unveiling of the immeasurable sky within is called *cit-akasha*, or literally the vision of space itself.

Anything physical is always changing, therefore its reality is not constant, not Eternal. Nature is in this sense like an actor who has only different roles. It never takes off its costume and makeup and goes home, but just changes from one role to another, for ever and ever. So with Nature we never quite know where we are, especially as we too are part of it.

The non-physical Reality, however difficult to grasp, must have the advantage of being eternal, always the same. This has a consequence. Whatever is real and unchanging must offer us a fixed point, an orientation, like a perfect north on a compass. And how does a compass work? By an attraction between magnetic north and a magnet in our compass. The compass is ourselves. So we are able to infer that there is a Universal Reality in ourselves that aligns us with a Universal Reality that is everywhere else. Do not forget the word align. It is through the alignment of my body that I discovered the alignment of my mind, self, and intelligence. Alignment from the outermost body or sheath (*kosa*) to the innermost is the way to bring our own personal Reality into contact with Universal Reality. The Vastisutra Upanishad says, “Setting the limbs along proper lines is praised like the knowledge of Brahman (God).” Even earlier, from the Rig Veda comes, “Every form is an image of the original form.” We have seen that this Reality is not changeable in Time or limited by Space. It is free of both. It follows that, although our journey takes place in time and space, if ever we

reach its end and encounter the supreme non-physical reality, it will not be in time and space as we know them.

Universal Soul (*Purusa*) and Nature (*Prakrti*)

I have purposely avoided until now using the usual translation for the non-physical reality as its mention usually stops people thinking for themselves. In Sanskrit, the word is Purusa. In English we can call it Cosmic or Universal Soul. The word Soul usually has such strong religious connotations that people either accept or dismiss it without reflection. They forget that it is simply our word for an abiding reality. It is logical but remains conceptual to our minds until we experience its realization within ourselves.

We rightly associate this abiding reality with selfless love, which is founded in the perception of unity, not difference. The strength of a mother's love derives from her unity with the child. In unity there is no possession, as possession is a dual state, containing me and it. Soul is unchanging, eternal, and constant; it always remains as witness, rooted in divine origin and oneness. The whole practice of yoga is concerned with exploring the relationship between Prakrti and Purusa, between Nature and Soul. It is about, to return to our original image, learning to live between the earth and the sky. That is the human predicament, our joy and our woe, our salvation or our downfall. Nature and Soul are mingled together. Some would say they are married. It is through the correct practice of asana and *pranayama* and the other petals of yoga that the practitioner (*sadhaka*) experiences the communication and connection between them. To an average person it might seem that the marriage of Nature and Soul is one of strife and mutual incomprehension. But by communing with them both, they come closer to each other for the purpose of a blessed union. That union removes the veil

of ignorance that covers our intelligence. To achieve this union, the sadhaka has to look both within as well as looking out to the frame of the soul, the body. He has to grasp an underlying law or else he will remain in Nature's thrall and Soul will remain merely a concept. Everything that exists in the macrocosm is to be found existing in the microcosm or individual.

The Eight Petals of Yoga

There are eight petals of yoga that reveal themselves progressively to the practitioner. These are external, ethical disciplines (*yama*), internal ethical observances (*niyama*), poses (*asana*), breath control (*pranayama*), sensory control and withdrawal (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and blissful absorption (*samadhi*). We call these the petals of yoga as they join together like the petals of a lotus flower to form one beautiful whole.

As we journey through the interior sheaths (*kosa*) of the body, from the exterior skin to the innermost self, we will encounter and explore each of the eight petals or stages of yoga described in the *Yoga Sutras*. For the seeker of Truth, these stages remain as important today as they were in the days of Patanjali. We cannot hope to understand and harmonize the sheaths without the precepts and practices provided in the eight petals. I will mention them here briefly, but they will be discussed more fully in the following chapters.

The yoga journey begins with the five universal moral commandments (*yama*). We learn in this way to develop control over our actions in the external world. The journey continues with five steps of self-purification (*niyama*). These relate to our inner world and senses of perception and help us to develop self-discipline. We will discuss these throughout the book, but initially they serve to curb our behavior toward others and toward ourselves. These ethical precepts are always with us from the beginning to the end of the yoga journey, for the

demonstration of one's spiritual realization lies in none other than how one walks among and interacts with one's fellow human beings.

After all, the goal of yoga may be the ultimate freedom but even before this is achieved, there is an incremental experience of greater freedom as we discover ever more self-control, sensitivity, and awareness that permit us to live the life we aspire to, one of decency; clean, honest human relations; goodwill and fellowship; trust; self-reliance; joy in the fortune of others; and equanimity in the face of our own misfortune. From a state of human goodness, we can progress toward the greater freedom. From doubt, confusion, and vice we cannot. Progression in yoga is a moral one for a very practical reason rather than a judgmental one. It is almost impossible to jump from "bad" to "best" without passing through "good." Also, as ignorance recedes, "good" is an infinitely more comfortable place to be than "bad." What we call "bad" is ignorance in action and, as a strategy for life, thrives only in darkness.

The third petal of yoga is the practice of postures (*yogasana*), which will be the next chapter of this book. Asana maintains the strength and health of the body, without which little progress can be made. It also keeps the body in harmony with nature. We all know that mind affects body, for example, "You look down in the dumps," or "He was crestfallen." Why not, suggests yoga, try the other way round—access mind through body. "Chin up" and "Shoulders back, stand up straight" express this approach. Self-cultivation through asana is the broad gateway leading to the inner enclosures we need to explore. In other words, we are going to try to use asana to sculpt the mind. We must discover what each sheath of being longs for and nourish it according to its subtle appetites. After all, it is the inner or subtler kosa that support the layers exterior to them. So we would say in yoga that the subtle precedes the gross, or spirit precedes matter. But yoga says we must deal with the outer or most manifest first, i.e. legs, arms, spine, eyes, tongue, touch, in order to develop the sensitivity to

move inward. This is why asana opens the whole spectrum of yoga's possibilities. There can be no realization of existential, divine bliss without the support of the soul's incarnate vehicle, the food-and-water-fed body, from bone to brain. If we can become aware of its limitations and compulsions, we can transcend them. We all possess some awareness of ethical behavior, but in order to pursue yama and niyama at deeper levels, we must cultivate the mind. We need contentment, tranquility, dispassion, and unselfishness, qualities that have to be earned. It is asana that teaches us the physiology of these virtues.

The fourth petal of yoga concerns the breathing techniques or pranayama (*prana* = vital or cosmic energy, *ayama* = extension, expansion). Breath is the vehicle of consciousness and so, by its slow, measured observation and distribution, we learn to tug our attention away from external desires (*vasana*) toward a judicious, intelligent awareness (*prajna*). As breath stills mind, our energies are free to unhook from the senses and bend inward to pursue the inner quest with heightened, dynamic awareness. Pranayama is not performed by the power of will. The breath must be enticed or cajoled, like catching a horse in a field, not by chasing after it, but by standing still with an apple in one's hand. In this way, pranayama teaches humility and frees us from greed or hankering after the fruits of our actions. Nothing can be forced; receptivity is everything.

The withdrawal of the senses into the mind (pratyahara) is the fifth petal of yoga, also called the hinge of the outer and inner quest. Unfortunately, we misuse our senses, our memories, and our intelligence. We let the potential energies of all these flow outward and get scattered. We may say that we want to reach the domain of the soul, but there remains a great tug-of-war. We neither go in nor out, and that saps the energy. We can do better.

By drawing our senses of perception inward, we are able to experience the control, silence, and quietness of the mind. This ability to still and gently silence the mind is essential, not only for meditation and

the inward journey but also so that the intuitive intelligence can function usefully and in a worthwhile manner in the external world.

The final three petals or stages are concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana), and total absorption (samadhi). These three are a crescendo, the yoga of final integration (*samyama yoga*).

We begin with concentration. Because dharana is so easy to translate as concentration, we often overlook or dismiss it. At school we learn to pay attention. This is useful, but it is not in yogic terms concentration. We do not say of a deer in the forest, “Look, he’s concentrating.” The deer is in a state of total vibrant awareness in every cell of his body. We often fool ourselves that we are concentrating because we fix our attention on wavering objects—a football match, a film, a novel, the waves of the sea, or a candle flame—but is not even the flame flickering? True concentration is an unbroken thread of awareness. Yoga is about how the Will, working with intelligence and the self-reflexive consciousness, can free us from the inevitability of the wavering mind and outwardly directed senses. Here, asana serves us greatly.

Consider the challenge of body on mind in an asana. The outer leg overstretches, but the inner leg drops. We can choose whether to let the situation be, or we can challenge the imbalance by the application of cognitive comparison supported by the force of will. Maintaining the equilibrium so that there is no back-sliding, we can add our observation of the knees, feet, skin, ankles, soles of feet, toes, etc.; the list is endless. Our attention not only envelopes but penetrates. Can we, like a juggler, keep these many balls in the air without letting any one drop, without release of attention? Is it any wonder asana takes many years to perfect?

When each new point has been studied, adjusted, and sustained, one’s awareness and concentration will necessarily be simultaneously directed to myriad points so that in effect consciousness itself is diffused evenly throughout the body. Here consciousness is penetrating

and enveloping, illuminated by a directed flow of intelligence and serving as a transformative witness to body and mind. This is a sustained flow of concentration (dharana) leading to an exalted awareness. The ever-alert Will adjusts and refines, creating a totally self-correcting mechanism. In this way, the practice of asana, performed with the involvement of all elements of our being, awakens and sharpens intelligence until it is integrated with our senses, our mind, our memory, our consciousness, and our soul. All of our bones, flesh, joints, fibers, ligaments, senses, mind, and intelligence are harnessed. The self is both the perceiver and the doer. When I use the word “self” with a small s, I mean the totality of our awareness of who and what we are in a natural state of consciousness. Thus the self assumes its natural form, neither bloated nor shrunken. In a perfect asana, performed meditatively and with a sustained current of concentration, the self assumes its perfect form, its integrity being beyond reproach.

If you want a simple way to remember the relationship between asana and concentration (dharana), it is this: If you learn a lot of little things, one day you may end up knowing a big thing.

Next we come to meditation (dhyana). In the speed of modern life, there is an unavoidable undertone of stress. This stress on mind builds up mental disturbances, such as anger and desire, which in turn build up emotional stress. Contrary to what many teachers try to tell you, meditation is not going to remove stress. Meditation is only possible when one has already achieved a certain “stressless” state. To be stressless, the brain must already be calm and cool. By learning how to relax the brain, one can begin to remove stress.

Meditation does not achieve this. You need to achieve all these as a foundation for meditation. However, I am aware that in modern English usage, the word meditation is often used for various forms of stress management and reduction. In this book, I shall be using it in its purest yogic sense as the seventh petal, which can be achieved only when all other physical and mental weaknesses have largely been elim-

inated. Technically speaking, true meditation in the yogic sense cannot be done by a person who is under stress or who has a weak body, weak lungs, hard muscles, collapsed spine, fluctuating mind, mental agitation, or timidity. Often people think that sitting quietly is meditation. This is a misunderstanding. True meditation leads us to wisdom (*jnana*) and awareness (*prajna*), and this specifically helps in understanding that we are more than our ego. For this one needs the preparations of the postures and the breathing, the withdrawal of the senses and concentration.

This process of relaxing the brain is achieved through asana. We generally think of mind as being in our head. In asana our consciousness spreads throughout the body, eventually diffusing in every cell, creating a complete awareness. In this way stressful thought is drained away, and our mind focuses on the body, intelligence, and awareness as a whole.

This allows the brain to be more receptive, and concentration becomes natural. How to keep the brain cells in a relaxed, receptive, and concentrated state is the art that yoga teaches. You must also remember that meditation (*dhyana*) is part and parcel of yoga; it is not separate. Yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi, all these are the petals of yoga. There is meditation in everything. Indeed, in all these petals of yoga one needs a reflective or a meditative mood.

The stress that saturates the brain is decreased through asana and pranayama, so the brain is rested, and there is a release from strain. Similarly, while doing the various types of pranayama the whole body is irrigated with energy. To practice pranayama people must have strength in their muscles and nerves, concentration and persistence, determination and endurance. These are all learned through the practice of asana. The nerves are soothed, the brain is calmed, and the hardness and rigidity of the lungs are loosened. The nerves are helped to remain healthy. You are at once one with yourself, and that is meditation.

One way of looking at meditation was offered by the Israeli astronaut, Ilan Ramon, who was killed in the Columbia Space Shuttle. After circling the earth, he made an appeal for “peace and a better life for everyone on earth.” He was not the only astronaut to experience this transcendent vision. Others noted that “having seen earth from a vantage point that blurs political difference, people who travel in space share a unique perspective.” Yet they are looking down on a planet where violent struggle is the norm. There is the biblical phrase “an eye for an eye,” a philosophy of revenge, not justice. But Mahatma Gandhi warned that in a world ruled by an eye for an eye, soon the whole world will be blind.

We cannot all go into outer space to glimpse a planet where shared human goals can be achieved by peaceful cooperation. But when we look at photos of our blue orb hanging in space with no national boundaries cut into its surface and the white cloak of clouds enveloping it, we too are moved by the earth’s unity. How then do we live this unity? Duality is the seed of conflict. But we all have access to a space, an inner space, where there is an end to duality, an end to conflict. This is what meditation teaches us, the cessation of the impersonating ego and the dawn of the true, unified Self, beyond which there is no other. Yoga says that the highest experience of freedom is Oneness, the supreme reality of unity. But we cannot penetrate inward in order to experience immortal bliss without first harmonizing the five sheaths that encompass the soul.

Asana and pranayama are the apprenticeship to that transcendence of duality. Not only do they prepare our bodies, spine, and breath for the challenge of inner serenity, but Patanjali specifically said that asana teaches us to transcend duality, that is, hot and cold, honor and dishonor, wealth and poverty, loss and gain. Asana bestows the firmness to live with equanimity in the vicissitudes of the world’s hurly-burly. Although it is strictly speaking possible only to meditate in one asana, it is possible to perform all asana in a meditative way, and this is what

my practice has now become. My asana is meditative, and my practice of pranayama is devotional. Meditation itself is the final conquest and dissolution of the ego, the false self, which impersonates the Real Self. Once duality is reconciled and transcended, by the grace of God, the supreme gift of samadhi may be granted.

In the final stage of samadhi (union), the individual self, with all its attributes, merges with the Divine Self, with the Universal Spirit. Yogis realize that the divine is not more heavenward than inward and in this final quest of the soul, seekers become seers. In this way they experience the divine at the core of their being. Samadhi is usually described as the final freedom, freedom from the wheel of *karma*, of cause and effect, action and reaction. Samadhi has nothing to do with perpetuating our mortal self. Samadhi is an opportunity to encounter our imperishable Self before the transient vehicle of body disappears, as in the cycle of nature, it surely must.

Yogis, however, do not stay in this stage of exalted bliss, but when they return to the world their actions are different, as they know in their innermost being that the divine unites us all and that a word or action done to another is ultimately done equally to oneself. Yoga considers actions to be of four kinds: black—those that bring only ill consequences; grey—those whose effects are mixed; white—those that bring good results; and a fourth, those that are without color, in which action brings no reaction. These last are the deeds of the enlightened yogi, who can act in the world without further chaining himself to the karmic wheel of becoming, or causality. Even white actions, consciously performed with good intent, bind us to a future in which we must harvest the good results. An example of a white action might be that if a lawyer, for the sake of justice, were to struggle to save an innocent man who is wrongly accused. But if a child were to dash into the road in front of an oncoming car, and you, in a flash, without a second's reflection, snatched the child out of harm's way, it would be like a yogi's action, that is to say, one based on direct, instantaneous

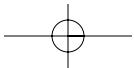
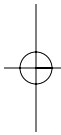
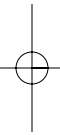
perception and action. You would not congratulate yourself by saying, “How well I saved that child.” That’s because you would not feel yourself to be the author, but rather the instrument of something that was simply “right,” existing purely in the moment, without reference to past or future.

For this reason, the final chapter in this book, “Living in Freedom,” concerns ethics and returns to the first two stages of yoga (yama and niyama). By seeing how the free or self-realized man or woman lives in the world, we will see what we can learn for how each of us lives not at some ultimate destination but each step along the journey inward and the journey of life onward.

Learning to Live in the Natural World

Before beginning this journey inward, we must clarify its nature. There is a frequent misunderstanding of the journey inward or the spiritual path, which suggests to most people a rejection of the natural world, the mundane, the practical, the pleasurable. On the contrary, to a yogi (or indeed a Taoist master or Zen monk) the path toward spirit lies entirely in the domain of nature. It is the exploration of nature from the world of appearances, or surface, into the subtlest heart of living matter. Spirituality is not some external goal that one must seek but a part of the divine core of each of us, which we must reveal. For the yogi, spirit is not separate from body. Spirituality, as I have tried to make clear, is not ethereal and outside nature but accessible and palpable in our very own bodies. Indeed the very idea of a spiritual path is a misnomer. After all, how can you move *toward* something that, like Divinity, is already by definition everywhere? A better image might be that if we tidy and clean our houses enough, we might one day notice that Divinity has been sitting in them all along. We do the same with the sheaths of the body, polishing them until they become a pure window to the divine.

A scientist sets out to conquer nature through knowledge—external nature, external knowledge. By these means he may split the atom and achieve external power. A yogi sets out to explore his own internal nature, to penetrate the atom (*atma*) of being. He does not gain dominion over wide lands and restless seas, but over his own recalcitrant flesh and febrile mind. This is the power of compassionate truth. The presence of truth can make us feel naked, but compassion takes all our shame away. It is this inner quest for growth and evolution, or “involution,” that is the profound and transformational yogic journey that awaits the seeker after Truth. We begin this involution with what is most tangible, our physical body, and the yogasana practice helps us to understand and learn how to play this magnificent instrument that each of us has been given.



Natarajasana*Chapter 2*

STABILITY

The Physical Body (*Asana*)

It is here that the yogi embarks on the inward journey toward the core of his being. Many associate yoga with a rejection of the world, its responsibilities, and commitments, and with extreme austerity leading even to self-mortification. But is not the greater challenge and greater fulfillment to be found living in the world with its tribulations and temptations, and at the same time to maintain both balance and self-control in the everyday life of a householder? To be spiritual, one must not deny or forget the body. Throughout the journey to the spiritual goal, the body must be kept active. Yoga is as old and traditional as civilization, yet it persists in modern society as a means to achieving essential vitality. But yoga demands that we develop not only strength

in body but attention and awareness in mind. The yogi knows that the physical body is not only the temple for our soul but the means by which we embark on the inward journey toward the core. Only by first attending to the physical body can we hope to accomplish anything in our spiritual lives. If a man or woman has aspirations to experience the divine, but his or her body is too weak to bear the burden, of what use are their aspirations and ambitions? That's all the more reason, therefore, for the vast majority of us who suffer from physical limitations and debilities to some degree to start yoga as soon as possible so that we may fit ourselves for the journey ahead of us.

Yoga offers us techniques to become aware, to expand and penetrate, and to change and evolve in order to become competent in the lives we live and to initiate sensitivity and receptivity toward the life of which we are still only dimly aware. We begin at the level of the physical body, the aspect of ourselves that is most concrete and accessible to all of us. It is here that *yogasana* and *pranayama* practice allow us to understand our body with ever greater insight and through the body to understand our mind and reach our soul. To a yogi, the body is a laboratory for life, a field of experimentation and perpetual research.

For the yogi, the physical body corresponds to one of the elements of nature, namely the earth. We are mortal clay, and we return to dust. All cultures recognize this truth, but nowadays we treat it as a mere metaphor. It is more than that. As you explore your own body, you are in fact exploring this element of nature itself. You are also developing the qualities of earth within yourself: solidity, shape, firmness, and strength.

I have described the *yogasanas* at length in my earlier books. In this chapter, we will discuss *asana* not in terms of the techniques of each position but in terms of the qualities and attributes that one must strive for in all *asana* and in life. As we perfect *asana*, we will come to understand the true nature of our embodiment, of our being, and of the divinity that animates us. And when we are free from physical dis-

abilities, emotional disturbances, and mental distractions, we open the gates to our soul (*atma*). To understand this, one must gain far more than technical proficiency, and one must do asana not merely as a physical exercise but as a means to understand and then integrate our body with our breath, with our mind, with our intelligence, with our consciousness, with our conscience, and with our core. In this way, one can experience true integration and reach the ultimate freedom.

The True Nature of Health

Most people ask only from their body that it does not trouble them. Most people feel that they are healthy if they are not suffering from illness or pain, not aware of the imbalances that exist in their bodies and minds that ultimately will lead to disease. Yoga has a threefold impact on health. It keeps healthy people healthy, it inhibits the development of diseases, and it aids recovery from ill health.

But diseases are not just a physical phenomenon. Anything that disturbs your spiritual life and practice is a disease and will manifest eventually in illness. Because most modern people have separated their minds from their bodies and their souls have been banished from their ordinary lives, they forget that the well-being of all three (body, mind, and spirit) are intimately entwined like the fibers of our muscles.

Health begins with firmness in body, deepens to emotional stability, then leads to intellectual clarity, wisdom, and finally the unveiling of the soul. Indeed health can be categorized in many ways. There is physical health, which we are all familiar with, but there is also moral health, mental health, intellectual health, and even the health of our consciousness, health of our conscience, and ultimately divine health. These are relative to and depend upon the stage of consciousness we are at, which will be dealt with in chapter 5.

But a yogi never forgets that health must begin with the body. Your body is the child of the soul. You must nourish and train your child.

Physical health is not a commodity to be bargained for. Nor can it be swallowed in the form of drugs and pills. It has to be earned through sweat. It is something that we must build up. You have to create within yourself the experience of beauty, liberation, and infinity. This is health. Healthy plants and trees yield abundant flowers and fruits. Similarly, from a healthy person, smiles and happiness shine forth like the rays of the sun.

The practice of *yogasana* for the sake of health, to keep fit, or to maintain flexibility is the external practice of yoga. While this is a legitimate place to begin, it is not the end. As one penetrates the inner body more deeply, one's mind becomes immersed in the *asana*. The first external practice remains dry and peripheral, while the second more intense practice literally soaks the practitioner with sweat, making him wet enough to pursue the deeper effects of the *asana*.

Do not underestimate the value of *asana*. Even in simple *asanas*, one is experiencing the three levels of the quest: the external quest, which brings firmness of the body; the internal quest, which brings steadiness of intelligence; and the innermost quest, which brings benevolence of spirit. While a beginner is not generally aware of these aspects while performing the *asana*, they are there. Often, we hear people saying that they remain active and light when they do just a little bit of *asana* practice. When a raw beginner experiences this state of well-being, it is not merely the external or anatomical effects of yoga. It is also about the internal physiological and psychological effects of the practice.

As long as the body is not in perfect health, you are caught in body consciousness alone. This distracts you from healing and culturing the mind. We need sound bodies so we can develop sound minds.

Body will prove to be an obstacle unless we transcend its limitations and remove its compulsions. Hence, we have to learn how to explore beyond our known frontiers, that is to expand and interpenetrate our awareness and how to master ourselves. *Asana* is ideal for this.

The keys to unlocking our potential are the qualities of purity and sensitivity. The point about purity, or simply cleanliness as it is often called in yoga texts, is not primarily a moral one. It is that purity permits sensitivity. Sensitivity is not weakness or vulnerability. It is clarity of perception and allows judicious, precise action.

On the other hand, rigidity comes from impurity, from accumulated toxins, whether in the physical sense or the mental, when we call it prejudice or narrow-mindedness. Rigidity is insensitivity. The sweat of exertion and the insight of penetration bring us, through a process of elimination and self-cultivation, both purity and sensitivity.

Purity and sensitivity benefit us not only in relation to the inward journey but in relation to our outer environment, the external world. The effects of impurity are highly undesirable. They cause us to develop a hard shell around us. If we construct a stiff shell between ourselves and the world outside our skin, we rob ourselves of most of life's possibilities. We are cut off from the free flow of cosmic energy. It becomes difficult in every sense to let nourishment in or to let toxic waste out. We live in a capsule, what a poet called a "vain citadel."

As mammals, we are homeostatic. That means we maintain certain constant balances within our bodies, temperature for example, by adapting to change and challenge in the environment. Strength and flexibility allow us to keep an inner balance, but man is trying more and more to dominate the environment rather than control himself. Central heating, air conditioning, cars that we take out to drive three hundred yards, towns that stay lit up all night, and food imported from around the world out of season are all examples of how we try to circumvent our duty to adapt to nature and instead force nature to adapt to us. In the process, we become both weak and brittle. Even many of my Indian students who all now sit on chairs in their homes are becoming too stiff to sit in lotus position easily.

Suppose you lose your job. That is an external challenge with attendant worries such as how to pay the mortgage and feed and clothe

the family. It is an emotional upheaval too. But if you are in balance, if there is an energetic osmosis between you and the outer world, you will adapt and survive by finding another job. Purity and sensitivity mean that we receive a cosmic paycheck each day of our lives. When harmony and integration begin through practice in our inner layers of being, there is immediately a beginning to harmony and integration with the world we live in.

A great boon of yoga, even for relative beginners, is the happiness it brings, a state of self-reliant contentment. Happiness is good in itself and a basis for progress. An unquiet mind cannot meditate. A happy and serene mind allows us to pursue our quest as well as live with artistry and skill. Does not the American Declaration of Independence talk of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness? If a yogi had written that, he would have said Life, Happiness, and the Pursuit of Liberty. Sometimes happiness may bring stagnation, but if freedom comes from disciplined happiness, there is the possibility of true liberation.

As I have said, the body should be neither neglected nor pampered, for it is the only instrument and the only resource we are provided with which to embark on the Pursuit of Liberty. At times it is fashionable to despise the body as something non-spiritual. Yet none can afford to neglect it. At other times it is fashionable to indulge the body and to despise what is not physical. Yet none can deny that there is more to life than mere physical pleasure and pain. If we abandon or indulge our bodies, sickness comes, and attachment to it increases. Your body no longer can serve as the vehicle for the inward journey and weighs like a millstone around your neck on the right royal road to the soul. If you say you are your body, you are wrong. If you say you are not your body, you are also wrong. The truth is that although body is born, lives, and dies, you cannot catch a glimpse of the divine except through the body.

Yoga sees the body quite differently than Western sports, which treats the body like a racehorse, trying to push it faster and faster and

competing with all other bodies in speed and strength. There are today in India yoga “Olympics” where yoga practitioners can compete with one another. I do not decry this. In my life, I have given many demonstrations around the world in an attempt to popularize yoga. While this was yoga as an exhibition of art, the essence of yoga is not about external display but internal cultivation. Yoga is beautiful as well as Divine. Ultimately, the yogi searches for the inner light as well as inner beauty, infinity, and liberation. Once I was called “Iron Iyengar” by a journalist, and I had to correct him that I am not hard like iron, but hard like a diamond. The hardness of a diamond is part of its usefulness, but its true value is in the light that shines through it.

How then should we approach and practice asana in a way that leads to health and purity? What is the way that leads from flexibility on to divinity? The *Yoga Sutras* by the sage Patanjali provides the foundation for the yogic life. Interestingly it has only four verses that deal specifically with asana. Each mention then is all the more worthy of close reading and deep understanding. Patanjali said that asanas bring perfection in body, beauty in form, grace, strength, compactness, and the hardness and brilliance of a diamond. His basic definition of asana is, “*Sthira sukham asanam.*” *Sthira* means firm, fixed, steadfast, enduring, lasting, serene, calm, and composed. *Sukha* means delight, comfort, alleviation, and bliss. *Asanam* is the Sanskrit plural for asana. The presentation of an asana should therefore be undisturbed, unperturbed, and unruffled at all levels of body, mind, and soul. Or, as I have translated it before, “Asana is perfect firmness of body, steadiness of intelligence, and benevolence of spirit.”

Ultimately, when all the sheaths of the body and all the parts of a person coordinate together while performing an asana, you experience the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind and also freedom from afflictions. In asana you must align and harmonize the physical body and all the layers of the subtle emotional, mental, and spiritual body. This is integration. But how does one align these sheathes and experience

this integration? How do we find such profound transformation in what from the outside may look simply like stretching or twisting the body into unusual positions? It begins with *awareness*.

Awareness: Every Pore of the Skin Has to Become an Eye

We think of intelligence and perception as taking place exclusively in our brains, but yoga teaches us that awareness and intelligence must permeate the body. Each part of the body literally has to be engulfed by the intelligence. We must create a marriage between the awareness of the body and that of the mind. When the two parties do not cooperate, there is unhappiness on both sides. This leads to a sense of fragmentation and “dis-ease.” For example, we should eat only when our mouths spontaneously salivate, as it is the body’s intelligence telling us that we are truly hungry. If not, we are force-feeding ourselves and disease will surely follow.

Many moderns use their bodies so little that they lose the sensitivity of this bodily awareness. They move from bed to car to desk to car to couch to bed, but there is no awareness in their movement, no intelligence. There is no action. *Action is movement with intelligence.* The world is filled with movement. What the world needs is more conscious movement, more action. Yoga teaches us how to infuse our movements with intelligence, transforming them into action. In fact action that is introduced in an asana should excite the intelligence, whereas normally the mind gets caught and excited in motion alone. An example of the latter is when you get passionately caught up in watching a football game. That is not yoga. Yoga is when you initiate an action in asana, and somewhere else in the body, something else moves without your permission. The intelligence questions this and asks, “Is that right or wrong? If wrong, what can I do to change it?”

How does one develop this intelligence in the body? How do we

learn to turn our movement into action? Asana can begin to teach us. We are developing such an intense sensitivity that each pore of the skin acts as an inner eye. We become sensitive to the interface between skin and flesh. In this way, our awareness is diffused throughout the periphery of our body and is able to sense whether in a particular asana our body is in alignment. You can adjust and balance the body gently from within with the help of these eyes. This is different from seeing with your normal two eyes. Instead you are feeling; you are sensing the position of your body. When you stand in the warrior pose with your arms extended, you can see the fingers of your hand in front of you, but you can also feel them. You can sense their position and their extension right to the tips of your fingers. You can also sense the placement of your back leg and tell whether it is straight or not without looking back or in a mirror. You must observe and correct the body position (adjusting it from both sides) with the help of the trillions of eyes that you have in the form of cells. This is how you begin to bring awareness to your body and fuse the intelligence of brain *and* brawn. This intelligence should exist everywhere in your body and throughout the asana. The moment you lose the feeling in the skin, the asana becomes dull, and the flow or current of the intelligence is lost.

The sensitive awareness of the body and the intelligence of the brain and heart should be in harmony. The brain may instruct the body to do a posture, but the heart has to feel it too. The head is the seat of intelligence; the heart is the seat of emotion. Both have to work in cooperation with the body.

There is an exercise of will, but the brain must be willing to listen to the body and see what is reasonable and prudent within the body's capacity. The intelligence of the body is a fact. It is real. The intelligence of the brain is only imagination. So the imagination has to be made real. The brain may dream of doing a difficult back bend today, but it cannot force the impossible even onto a willing body. We are always trying to progress, but inner cooperation is essential.

Your brain may say, “We can do it.” But the knee may say, “Who are you to dictate to me? It is for me to say whether I can do it or not.” So you have to listen to what the body says. Sometimes the body cooperates with you, and sometimes it thinks things over. If necessary, use your intelligence to reflect. Solutions will present themselves even though this is initially through trial and error. Then you will have true understanding between the body and the mind, but this requires the humility of the brain and also understanding in the body. The brain does not know everything. If the brain receives knowledge from the body, it will be able to increase the intelligence of the body later. In this way, the body and the brain begin working together to master the asana.

This is the process of interweaving and interpenetration, when the sheaths or layers of being work in harmony with one another. By interweaving, I mean that all the threads and fibers of our being at every level are drawn into contact and communication with each other. This is how the body and the mind learn to work together. The skin provides our outermost layer of intelligence. At our core lies our innermost wisdom. So the knowledge from outer perception and inner wisdom should always be in contact in your postures. At that time there is no duality; you are one; you are complete. You exist without the feeling of existence. The challenge from the skin should tap the Self, our Soul, and the Self has to ask, “What more have I to do?” The external knowledge incites the Self to act.

As I have said, while doing yoga, the body must tell one what to do, not the brain. Brain has to cooperate with the message it receives from the body. I will often say to a student, “Your brain is not in your body! That is why you can’t get the asana.” I mean of course that his intelligence is in his head and not filling his body. It may be that your brain moves faster than your body or your body may fail to fulfill the instructions of your brain owing to lack of right guidance from your intelligence. You must learn to move the brain a bit more slowly so that it follows the body, or you have to make the body move faster to match

the intelligence of the brain. Let the body be the doer, the brain the observer.

After acting, reflect on what you have done. Has the brain interpreted the action correctly? If the brain does not observe correctly, then there is confusion in action. The duty of the brain is to receive knowledge from the body and then guide the body to further refine the action. Pause and reflect between each movement. This is progression in attention. Then in the stillness, you can be filled with awareness. Ask yourself, “Has every part of me done its job?” The Self has to find out whether this has been done well or not.

Pausing to reflect on your movement does not mean that you are not reflecting throughout the movement. There should be constant analysis throughout the action, not just afterward. This leads to true understanding. The real meaning of knowledge is that action and analysis synchronize. Slow motion allows reflective intelligence. It allows our minds to watch the movement and leads to a skillful action. The art of yoga lies in the acuity of observation.

When we ask ourselves, “What am I doing?” and “Why am I doing it?” our minds open. This is self-awareness. However, it is necessary to point out that students should be self-aware, not self-conscious. Self-consciousness is when the mind constantly worries and wonders about itself, doubting and being self-absorbed. It is like having the devil and angel sitting on your shoulders constantly arguing over what you should do. When you are self-conscious, you are going to exhaust yourself. You are also going to strain the muscles unnecessarily because you are thinking about the asana and how far you want to stretch and not experiencing the asana and stretching according to your capacity.

Self-awareness is the opposite of self-consciousness. When you are self-aware, you are fully within yourself, not outside yourself looking in. You are aware of what you are doing without ego or pride.

When you cannot hold the body still, you cannot hold the brain

still. If you do not know the silence of the body, you cannot understand the silence of the mind. Action and silence have to go together. If there is action, there must also be silence. If there is silence, there can be conscious action and not just motion. When action and silence combine like the two plates of a car's clutch, it means that intelligence is in gear.

While doing the postures, your mind should be in an interior conscious state that does not mean sleep; it means silence, emptiness, space that can then be filled with an acute awareness of the sensations given by the posture. You watch yourself from inside. It is a full silence. Maintain a detached attitude toward the body and, at the same time, do not neglect any part of the body or show haste but remain alert while doing the asana. Rushing saps the strength, whether you are in Delhi or New York. Do things rhythmically with a calm mind.

It is difficult to speak of bodily knowledge in words. It is much easier to experience it, to discover what it feels like. It is as if the rays of light of your intelligence were shining through your body, out your arms to your fingertips and down your legs and out through the soles of your feet. As this happens, the mind becomes passive and begins to relax. This is an alert passivity and not a dull, empty one. The state of alert repose regenerates the mind and purifies the body.

As you are doing an asana, you have to recharge your intellectual awareness all the time; that means the attention flows without interruption. The moment you collapse, you do not recharge, and the attention is dispersed. Then, the practice of the asana is a habit, not an invigorating creative practice. The moment you bring attention, you are creating something, and creation has life and energy. Awareness allows us to overcome tiredness and exhaustion in our poses and in our lives. For yogis who go out of their way to help those who come to them, fatigue always eats at us. It is an occupational hazard of a yoga teacher. So we have to accept the fatigue and reapply ourselves with intense awareness to regenerate the body and to gain back energy. Awareness in action brings back energy and rejuvenates the body and

mind. Awareness brings life. Life is dynamic, and so therefore the asanas should also be.

Dynamic Extension: From the Core of Your Being

The goal of all asana practice is doing them from the core of your being and extending out dynamically through to the periphery of your body. As you stretch, in turn the periphery relates messages back to the core. From head to heels, you must find your center, and from this center you must extend and expand longitudinally and latitudinally. If extension is from the intelligence of the brain, expansion is from the intelligence of the heart. While doing asana, both the intellectual intelligence and the emotional intelligence have to meet and work together. Extension is attention, and expansion is awareness, I often say. It is the bringing of attention and awareness to the tips of your body and activating the skin.

While practicing the asana, it is very important to develop the sensitivity in the skin. One has to create room between the skin and the underlying tissue so that there is no friction between them. The tissues contain the motor nerves, and the skin contains the sensory nerves. They have to function with an understanding of each other in an asana in order to make the intelligence circulate freely without interruption in the body. This is somewhat like an otter that is attached to its skin only through its nose, four paws, and tail and appears to move freely around within.

Extension and expansion always stay firmly rooted in one's center. They originate in the core of one's being. When most people stretch, they simply stretch *to* the point that they are trying to reach, but they forget to extend and expand from where they are. When you extend and expand, you are not only stretching *to*, you are also stretching *from*. Try holding out your arm at your side and stretch it. Did your

whole chest move with it? Now try to stay centered and extend out your arm to your fingertips. Did you notice the difference? Did you notice the space that you created and the way in which you stretched from your core? Now try expanding your arm outward in every direction like the circumference of a circle. The stretch should bring the sensitivity and experience of creating space in every direction.

Overstretching occurs when one loses contact with one's center, with the divine core. Instead, the ego wants simply to stretch further, to reach the floor, regardless of its ability, rather than extending gradually from the center. Each movement must be an art. It is an art in which the Self is the only spectator. Keep your attention internal, not external, not worrying about what others see, but what the Self sees. Do not fixate on how far you want to stretch, but in doing the stretch correctly. Do not focus on where you want to go but on going as far as you can with dynamic extension.

One should not overstretch, nor understretch. If one thing is overstretched, something else gets understretched. If overstretching comes from a swollen ego, then understretching results from a lack of confidence. If overstretching is exhibitionism, understretching is escapism. Overstretching and understretching are both wrong: Always stretch from the source, the core, and the foundation of each asana. This is the art of dynamic extension. It is not yoga that injures, but it is the way one does yoga that leads to injury. The moment space becomes narrow, it means you are injuring. In the correct asana, there is no narrowness. Even if your body is stiff, you have to bring space.

Always try to *extend and expand* the body. Extension and expansion bring space, and space brings freedom. Freedom is precision, and precision is divine. From freedom of the body comes freedom of the mind and then the Ultimate Freedom. The Ultimate Freedom that yoga works toward can be tasted in our own bodies, as each limb gains independence, flexibility, and freedom from its neighboring limbs. Cer-

tainly, stiffness and rigidity in the body is like wearing a straightjacket or living one's life in a prison.

The movement of the skin gives the understanding of the asana. You must feel the extension to the limits of your skin. As I have said, the skin is the brain of the body, telling what is happening everywhere. The skin, like a mirror, reflects one's mental state, whether tight, slack, flaccid, swollen, tremulous, or stuck. So watch the quality of the skin in practice.

When you extend to your skin, you are also extending your nerve endings. Extending them opens them so that they can throw out their stored impurities. That is why I teach extension and expansion. The nerves release and relax. You feel as if you are extending the skin, the muscles, and even the bones of your body. Practice asanas by creating space in the muscles and skin, so that the body fits into the asana. To do this, the whole body has to act. To extend the part, you must extend the whole.

If the stretch is even, throughout the whole body, there is no strain at all. This does not mean that there is no exertion. There is exertion, but this exertion is exhilaration. There is no wrong stress or strain. A state of elation is felt within. When there is strain, the practice of yoga is purely physical and leads toward imbalances and misjudgment. One feels weary and tired and gets irritated and disturbed. When one stops straining and the brain is passive, it becomes spiritual yoga. When you have extended to the extreme, live in that asana, and experience the joy of freedom in that asana. While stretching, you must always create space and extend from your center. Compression is bondage, and expansion is freedom.

Horizontal expansion and vertical extension should synchronize so that you are extending in all directions. Freedom in a posture is when every joint is active. Let us be full in whatever posture it is we are doing just as we should be full in whatever we do in our lives. In pos-

tures it is important to study how far our awareness is extending from the center, how far it penetrates. As the river flows to the sea uninterrupted, our extension should be one single action with single attention. Like the river, your movements should be in that one single action from start to finish. In this way, the energy in our nervous systems flows like the river. As you extend, see whether the energy flows without interruption or not. Everywhere you extend, you are going toward the cosmos. Your energy extends through to the tips of your skin and beyond. This is the secret that martial artists use to generate extraordinary force. They do not punch a brick, they punch through it. Extend the energy of the asana out through your extremities. Let the river flow through you.

Extension is freedom, and freedom allows for relaxation. When there is relaxation in the asana, there is no fatigue. However, you must know the difference between relaxation and laxity. In laxity there is chaos and heedlessness as well as carelessness, and therefore the flow of energy is erratic. In relaxation there is careful adjustment, and hence energy is rhythmic. While in relaxation in the asana, we move outward, and we also remain centered in our core, extending outward and penetrating inward. This is what Patanjali meant when he says in his second *sutra* on asana that “Perfection is achieved when the effort to perform it becomes effortless and the infinite being within is reached.”

Relaxation: In Every Pose There Should Be Repose

There is always relaxation in the right position, even though you are fully stretching. The ego is an unrelenting task master. It does not know that one must balance activity and passivity in the asana, exertion and relaxation. When one extends and relaxes, there is no oscillation of mind or body. Balance of activity and passivity transforms the active

brain into a witness. This involves keeping the brain passive and the cells of the body active without gripping the muscles. When there is only exertion, one keeps a constant load on the muscles, which tire due to overstretching, and injury occurs. The mind does not balance when you force.

Relaxation means release of unnecessary muscular tension in your body, which also allows firmness of the inner body and serenity in the mind. But how does one experience this peace as one is struggling with the body? How does one experience this serenity as one is feeling the aches and pains of learning the asana? We will return to the subject of pain later and discuss how one can come to see it with equanimity, firmness, and serenity. Here we will give some clues to how to relax in an asana, how to lighten the body, and how to avoid rigidity and hardness.

Begin your asana by releasing the breath till you feel a quiet state of silence in the cells and self. Inhalation is tension, exhalation is freedom. All movements should be done with exhalation. Exhalation purges the stress and tension of the body.

After doing the asana, if you want to stretch deeper, exhale and stretch again. Readjusting the asana after exhalation works on the inner organic body, whereas if done by inhalation it acts on the external physical body. Although a final asana can be judged objectively only from the exterior, it is sustained from within. After reaching the final pose, one has to learn to let go of the effort and tautness of the muscles and shift the load onto the ligaments and joints so that they hold the asana steadily without even the breath causing the body to waver.

Focus on relaxing as you hold the stretch, not clenching, but relaxing and opening. This relaxes the brain as well as the body. You must relax the neck and head as well. If you keep the back skin of the neck passive and the tongue soft, there is no tension in the brain. This is silence in action, relaxation in action. As soon as you learn how to

relax the tongue and throat, you know how to relax the brain, because there is also a connection between the tongue and the throat and the brain. The throat, according to yoga, is the region of *vishuddhi chakra*, a purifying wheel. As long as the throat is tense inside, not relaxed, it is an impure wheel. Tightness suggests an intoxication that induces a more general impurity. Look at the Soul, not the Ego. If your throat is tense while doing an asana or pranayama, you are doing it with your egoistic brain instead of your body. Do not clench your teeth or you will also be “clenching” your brain. These are things that you can notice when you are sitting in your office working as well as when you are doing the yogasana practice.

Notice your eyes as well, as you hold the stretch. Tenseness of the eyes also affects the brain. If the eyes are still and silent, the brain is still and passive. The brain can learn only when it begins to relax. When the brain is tense and nervous, chaos sets in, and the brain does not understand anything. The eyes are near the brain, and their behavior reflects the state of the brain. When one is confused, one’s brow wrinkles, and the eyes show instability and grow narrow. Compressing the eyes locks the brain and increases stress. When the eyes are wide and open, the brain is eager and receptive. If you are straining the eyes, it means you are living in the world of stress. If the eyes are tense, the brain is doing the asana, not the body. If we look with tension in our eyes, it means our nerves are already exhausted, and we are unnecessarily straining, which causes us to lose energy. In asana practice, we are trying to generate and stabilize our energy, to maintain it and not waste it unnecessarily. Relax the eyes as you look, otherwise you are wasting a great deal of energy.

The eyes should be soft and sunk in. Keep the eyes open and relaxed and at the same time looking backward during your practice. This looking backward educates the eyes to look within and allows you to observe your body and brain. Let your eyes be like flowers,

blossoming. Feeling is looking; looking is feeling. You have to feel with your eyes open. If the eyes are outward rather than inward, there is no integration.

When we direct our eyes looking forward from the corner of the temple in its normal field of vision, the frontal brain is working with analysis (*vitarka*). But when we spread our ocular awareness from the back corner of the temple, near the ear, the back brain is brought into play and works with synthesis (*vicara*). The front brain can dismantle because of its powerful penetration. The back brain is holistic and re-assembles. If you find this difficult to imagine, just think what happens when you first walk into a great medieval cathedral. Your eyes may appear to focus on what is before them, the altar for example, but your real awareness takes in the whole immense volume of the space surrounding you, its grandeur and the hum of its ancient silence. This is holistic meditative vision.

While working in asana, if the action is “done” solely from the front brain, it blocks the reflective action of the back brain. The form of each asana needs to be reflected to the wisdom body (*vijnanamaya kosa*) for readjustment and realignment. Whenever asana is done mechanically from the front brain, the action is felt only on the peripheral body, and there is no inner sensation, there is no luminous inner light. If the asana is done with continual reference to the back of the brain, there is a reaction to each action, and there is sensitivity. Then life is not only dynamic, but it is also electrified with life force.

The light and life of our vision should shine everywhere. Finally, the eye of the soul, often called the “third eye,” is between your eyebrows but a little higher. If that is still, your soul is still and like a witness observes everything without being affected or enmeshed. So the skin of your brow should be relaxed too.

Relaxation begins from the outer layer of the body and penetrates the deep layers of our existence. Detail and precision of the body lead

to mastery of the art of relaxation. One who knows the art of relaxation also knows the art of meditation. Whether one lives in the East or the West, North or South, everyone suffers from stress, and everyone craves rest and relaxation. If one stretches completely, one relaxes completely. Look at a cat, a master of stretching and a master of relaxation. The “effortless effort” that Patanjali describes is also characterized by another important quality, lightness.

Lightness: Think Light and Feel Light

When an asana is done correctly, the body movements are smooth, and there is lightness in the body and freedom in the mind. When an asana is felt as being heavy, it is wrong. You must try to impart a feeling of lightness throughout your body. This can be achieved by mentally extending yourself outward from the center of your body, that is, think tall and act tall. Think not just of raising your arms but of extending them outward in the physical sense, and when you are holding them still, think again of extending the intelligence by reaching still further away from your body. Do not think of yourself as a small, compressed, suffering thing. Think of yourself as graceful and expanding, no matter how unlikely it may seem at the time.

When we lose this lightness, our bodies shrink. The moment the body shrinks, the brain becomes heavy and dull, and you see nothing. The doors of perception are closed. You should immediately lift the intelligence of the chest and open the mind. The corners of the chest are pillars: They should always be firm. Slouching acts like a narcotic to the body. When our parents tell us not to slouch, it is because they instinctively understand that collapsing our chest caves in the very Self. It is because your mind shrinks that your soul shrinks. It is the spine’s job to keep the mind alert. To do this, the spine has to keep the brain in position. The spine must never be slack but must reach up to the Self. Otherwise, the divine light within you dims.

As you extend in an asana, you must maintain this lightness. It is for this reason, I say, that in all asanas, ascend to descend and descend to ascend. If we want to touch our toes, for example, we must first stretch upward to open the hinge in the middle of the body, and then we can descend. Similarly, we descend to ascend. We are trying to fill a circle, like in Leonardo DaVinci's famous drawing of human proportions, the Vitruvius Man. We are not trying to break a piece of string by pulling in two different directions. We are seeking the balance of polarity, not the antagonism of duality.

When there is softness in the body and lightness in mind, the asana is correct. Hardness and heaviness mean the asana is wrong. Wherever there is tightness, the brain is overreacting, and you are caught and trapped there; so there is no freedom. Performance from the intellect of the heart, with lightness, firmness, and at the same time softness means it is a total stretch, total extension, and total expansion. Asana done from the brain makes one heavy and done from the heart makes one light.

When should an asana be soft and when should it be rigid? In motion the whole muscle should be like the petals of the flower, open and soft. Never be rigid in motion; only be rigid after you have acquired the position. As a farmer ploughs a field and makes the ground soft, a yogi ploughs his nerves so they can germinate and make a better life. This practice of yoga is to remove weeds from the body so that the garden can grow. If the ground is too hard, what life can grow there? If the body is too stiff and the mind is too rigid, what life can it live?

In contrast to rigidity, tension is not good or bad. It has to be present at the right time in the right amount. Weighing or balancing it evenly is life. There is nothing in this world where yogis say there should be no tension at all. Even dead bodies have tension. You have to find the right amount of tension in your body. The right amount will keep all of your energy in your body. Too much tension is aggression. Injuries come by aggression, by doing aggressive movements, not by

doing yoga. But too little tension is weakness. There should be right tension in the body. Right tension is healthy tension. You have to bring everything to life in your body. Remember: Never be rigid in motion. Extension is tension, but it is different than rigidity. Rigidity makes us brittle and causes us to lose our balance. Balance must be achieved at every level of our body and our being.

Balance: Evenness Is Harmony

Through yoga one can begin to develop a perfect balance between both sides of the body. All of us begin with imbalances, favoring one side or the other. When one side is more active than the other, the active side must become the guru for the inactive side to make it equally active. To the weaker side, we must apply attention. We must also show more care. We show keener interest to improve a dull and struggling friend than for an eager and intelligent one. In the same way you have to show yourself this same compassion and act on the weaker side of the body while taking pleasure in the achievement of the active side.

Precision in action comes when the challenge by one side of the body is met by an equal counter-challenge of the other. This ignites the light of knowledge. You must keep your balance by using the intelligence of the body (whether instinct, feeling, or ability) but not by strength. When you keep the balance by strength, it is physical action; when by intelligence of the body, it is relaxation in action. Evenness is harmony, and in that evenness alone you learn.

Seek balance of awareness in all positions by observing the differences on the right and left as well as the intensity of stretch from plane to plane, limb to limb, muscle to muscle, joint to joint, and from bottom to top, side to side, and back to front. Create equal stretch, equal stability, equal spacing, and equal intensity of movement. To bring a part of the body in correct alignment, you have to work with the whole body. You have to work with each and every part of the

body. For each asana or pranayama, you have to know what the function or state of each area and each part of the body should be, whether active or passive, stable or mobile. When performing asanas, no part of the body should be idle, no part should be neglected. If you are stretching the right leg, for example, the left leg should not be forgotten. On the contrary you have to alert the left leg to remain stable. This complementary action frees up the right leg to move with ease. Extend where the body is not moving. If you perspire on one side, you should also evenly perspire on the other. When you perspire more on one side, you have not used the other portion fully. Perspiration should be even but not excessive.

In each asana, if the contact between the body and the floor—the foundation—is good, the asana will be performed well. Always watch your base: Be attentive to the portion nearest the ground. Correct first from the root. The standing poses are meant to begin providing this foundation for life. They strengthen the ankles and the knees. When a person is mentally disturbed or dejected, you'll notice he can't stand firmly on his feet. These postures teach one how to stand straight so that the brain can float in its position. Feet are like the root of a tree. If one can't stand properly on one's feet, one develops a negative attitude toward life, and one's yoga too becomes unsteady. These postures help one to maintain stability in times of difficulty and even when catastrophes occur. When stability becomes a habit, maturity and clarity follow. Stability requires balance.

Balance does not mean merely balancing the body. Balance in the body is the foundation for balance in life. In whatever position one is in, or in whatever condition in life one is placed, one must find balance. Balance is the state of the present—the here and now. If you balance in the present, you are living in Eternity. When the intellect is stable, there is no past, no future, only present. Do not live in the future; only the present is real. The mind takes you constantly to the future, as it plans, worries, and wonders. Memory takes you to the past, as it ruminates

and regrets. Only the Self takes you to the present, for the divine can be experienced only now. The past, present, and future are held together in each asana as thought, word, and deed become one.

One has to find the median line of each asana so that the energy is properly distributed. When one wavers from the median line, then one goes either to the past or the future. Vertical ascending is the future; vertical descending is the past. The horizontal is the present. The present is the perfect asana. When you open horizontally, future and past meet in the present. This is how dynamic extension and expansion allow you to find balance and live more fully in the present through your body. In asana, we find balance and integration in the three dimensions of space, but we also find balance and integration in the fourth dimension of time.

The ancient sages said that the key to life was balance, balance as I have emphasized in every layer of our being. But what are we supposed to balance? The answer lies in the three qualities of nature, which are called the *guna*. These three qualities must be balanced in your asana practice and in your body, mind, and soul. Roughly they are translated as solidity, dynamism, and luminosity.

We have seen that the essence of nature is change, a never-ending expression and re-expression of itself. What, we must ask ourselves, constantly provokes that change? Why do things simply not stay as they are? This is because of the *guna*, the three complementary forces that Indian philosophy identifies as emerging from the very root of nature at the moment of creation. Understanding the *guna*, these three forces of nature, will be important for the success of your practice of *yogasana* and your inward journey to the Universal Soul.

As soon as nature becomes manifest, these three forces shift. They lose their balance and create instability. That instability is very fertile. Mathematicians say that numbers progress from one to two to three to many. It is the number three that unlocks the possibility of infinite diversity. Infinite, unmanifested origin is one. Duality is two. Duality

is the idea or concept of separation, of division, but alone it cannot manifest in phenomena. Three is a wave, a sine curve, a vibration like light or sound. When two waves collide, a new phenomenon is created. That is the creativity inherent in nature. Even at the subtlest level, that of vibration and infra-atomic particles, nature's built-in wobble sets it on an endless cycle of creation, destruction, and recreation. From three comes many.

As I said, the *guna* is made up of three complementary forces. They are: *tamas* (mass or inertia), *rajas* (vibrancy or dynamism), and *sattva* (luminosity or the quality of light).

Let us look at a practical example. In *asana*, we are trying to broach the mass of our gross body, to break up the molecules and divide them into atoms that will allow our vision to penetrate within. Our body resists us. It is mulish. It will not budge. Why? Because in body *tamas* predominates. It has to. Body needs mass, bones need density, and sinew and muscle need solidity and firmness. To be firm-fleshed is desirable; to be slack-muscled is not.

Density in bones is a virtue, but in brains it is a vice. You hear people say, "He's thick," or "Don't be dense," because in our brain and nervous system, *rajas* (dynamism and vibrancy) should predominate, and density is a liability. Whereas mind is naturally quick, mercurial, and slippery, body tends to heaviness, inertia, and sluggishness. An excess is unwelcome; a muscle-bound body is like a very heavy car with a small engine; it will only move slowly. More than that, it takes more energy to overcome inertia than to pick up speed. For example, it is more difficult to push a stationary car up to one mile per hour than to push it from one mile per hour to two miles per hour.

With regard to *asana* practice, this means that initially we need to exert ourselves more as resistance is greater. Of the two aspects of *asana*, exertion of our body and penetration of our mind, the latter is eventually more important. Penetration of our mind is our goal, but in the beginning to set things in motion, there is no substitute for sweat.

But once there is movement and then momentum, penetration can start. When effort becomes effortless, asana is at its highest level. Inevitably this is a slow process, and if we break off our practice, inertia reasserts itself. What we are really doing is infusing dense matter with vibrant energy. That is why good practice brings a feeling of lightness and vitality. Though the mass of our body is heavy, we are meant to tread lightly on this earth.

We must be clear that the key issue is one of appropriate proportion and balance in the guna according to the material phenomenon involved. For example, it is appropriate for a table to be very *tamasic*. If we want it to be more *rajasic*, we add wheels and call it a trolley. Tamas gives density and mass, and when these qualities exceed our needs, we call it dullness and inertia. An inert mass is one that we cannot energize with rajas.

The negative aspect of rajas is turbulent, frenetic, and agitated. We want a quick mind, not an agitated one. We also want a calm, clear mind, which brings us to sattva. These words express a value, rather than an explicit reality. The truth is that we experience too little of sattva to know it well. The solidity of tamas and the eye-drawing movement of rajas eclipse our view. In a world of objects and sensory excitement, tamas and rajas reign. But if you can come to yoga with a wish to learn how truly to relax and yet remain alert, you are really saying that you would like sattva to play a more prominent role in your life. We use the word luminosity, which is the inner, serene quality of light, to describe sattva. It is that quality we are trying to elevate and integrate within us. Luminosity is clear, alert, and tranquil.

The interplay of these three guna forces is of crucial importance in your yoga practice. You have to learn to identify and observe them in order to be able to adjust and balance their proportions and as you penetrate inward, bring the beauty of sattva to the surface. You are like an artist with three basic pigments on his palette, forever remixing and blending them in order to express the right combination of color, form,

and light on your canvas. It is through the ability to do this that you can also avoid pain and heal diseases whether they are at mental, emotional, or physical stages of manifestation. Since pain is an unavoidable part of asana practice, it must now be addressed in its own right.

Pain: Find Comfort Even in Discomfort

Many people focus on the past or the future to avoid experiencing the present, often because the present is painful or difficult to endure. In yoga class, many students think that they must simply “grit their teeth and bear it” until the teacher tells them they can come out of the asana. This is seeing yoga as calisthenics and is the wrong attitude. The pain is there as a teacher, because life is filled with pain. In the struggle alone, there is knowledge. Only when there is pain will you see the light. Pain is your guru. As we experience pleasures happily, we must also learn not to lose our happiness when pain comes. As we see good in pleasure, we should learn to see good in pain. Learn to find comfort even in discomfort. We must not try to run from the pain but to move through and beyond it. This is the cultivation of tenacity and perseverance, which is a spiritual attitude toward yoga. This is also the spiritual attitude toward life.

Just as the ethical codes of yoga purify our actions in the world, the asanas and pranayama purify our inner world. We use these practices to help us learn to bear and overcome the inevitable pains and afflictions of life. Let me give you an example. To detect diabetes, one takes a test to see how well sugar is tolerated in the body. Similarly the practices of yoga show us how much pain the body can bear and how much affliction the mind can tolerate. Since pain is inevitable, asana is a laboratory in which we discover how to tolerate the pain that cannot be avoided and how to transform the pain that can. While we do not actively seek out pain, we do not run from the inevitable pain that is part of all growth and change. The asanas help us to develop greater

tolerance in body and mind so that we can bear the stress and strain more easily. In other words, the effort and its unavoidable pains are an essential part of what the asanas can teach us. Back bends, for example, allow us to see the courage and tenacity of people, to see whether they can bear the pain. Balancing asanas on the arms teach and cultivate tolerance. If you can adapt to and balance in a world that is always moving and unstable, you learn how to become tolerant to the permanence of change and difference.

Endurance is needed to remain in an asana. To master an asana, you need patience and discipline. The asana will not come by making faces. So how does one learn to make pain bearable? We have already seen how one must create repose in the pose; one must create relaxation even as there is the right amount of tension. This relaxation can start by releasing the stress residing in the temples and in the cells of the brain. This de-stresses the load of the brain, by releasing the eyes and the temples. This in turn takes the stress load off the nerves and muscle fiber. That is how you can convert an unbearable pain into a bearable one, which allows you the time and space in which to eventually master the asana and eradicate the pain all together.

To get freedom, you have to bear the pain. This is equally true in life. My student said that while sitting for pranayama, she got pins and needles in her feet, and all her concentration was on her feet. I told her that what she had done was also good practice. Because it was not serene, she thought she had done it badly. But practice is not just about pleasurable sensations. It is about awareness, and awareness leads us to notice and understand both the pleasure and the pain.

In the beginning, pain can be very strong because the body resists us. By surrendering to it, we soften the body, and gradually it will lessen. But if once we are more proficient and pain returns acutely at a time when it should not be there, it is prudent to leave the asana for a while and reflect on what is going wrong. Pain comes only when the

body does not understand how to do the asana, which is the case in the beginning. In the correct posture, pain does not come. To learn the right posture, you have to face the pain. There is no other way.

Your intelligence should have an intimacy with your body. It should be in close contact and know it well. When there is no intimacy between your mind and your body, there is duality, there is separation, and there is no integration. When you experience pain, you come in close contact with the part that is painful, so that you can adjust it and lessen the pain and feel the lightness. Pain is a great philosopher, because it thinks constantly of how to get rid of itself and demands discipline. The other side of the equation of pain is the understanding of how pain brings focus of attention on the affected area. If we release the tension of the brain, that attention shows the way to lessen and later eradicate the source of pain. In this way, pain can be a great teacher, which educates us how to live with it and eventually say goodbye.

It is not just that yoga is causing all of this pain; the pain is already there. It is hidden. We just live with it or have learned not to be aware of it. It is as if your body is in a coma. When you begin yoga, the unrecognized pains come to the surface. When we are able to use our intelligence to purify our bodies, then the hidden pains are dispersed. As long as there is tightness in body and mind, there is no peace. Internal mistakes such as forcing, acting without observing, tightening the throat, and blocking the ears create habits, and these habits create lack of awareness, constriction, heaviness, tightness, imbalance, and pain. For example, when muscles that have atrophied return to life, there are the pangs of rebirth. There are only two ways to confront pain: to live with the pain forever or to work with the pain and see if you can eradicate it.

While we must recognize the existence and importance of pain, we must not glorify it. Where pain exists, there must be a reason for it.

The goal is not to hold at any cost an asana that is painful or to try to achieve it prematurely. This is how I hurt myself as a young practitioner when my teacher demanded that I do the Hanuman asana, which involves an extreme leg stretch, without proper training or preparation. The goal is to do the asana with as much possible intensity of intelligence and love. To do this, one must learn the difference between “right” pain and “wrong” pain.

Right pain is not only constructive but also exhilarating and involves challenge, while wrong pain is destructive and causes excruciating suffering. Right pain is for our growth and for our physical and spiritual transformation. Right pain is usually felt as a gradual lengthening and strengthening feeling and must be differentiated from wrong pain, which is often a sharp and sudden cautionary feeling that our body uses to tell us we have gone too far beyond our present abilities. In addition, if you get a pain that is persistent, and intensifying as you work, it’s likely a wrong pain.

The challenge of yoga is to go beyond our limits—*within reason*. We continually expand the frame of the mind by using the canvas of the body. It is as if you were to stretch a canvas more and create a larger surface for a painting. But we must respect the present form of our body. If we pull too fast or too much at once, we will rip the canvas. If the practice of today damages the practice of tomorrow, it is not correct practice.

Many yoga teachers ask you to do the asanas with ease and comfort and without any stress or true exertion. This ultimately leaves the practitioner living within the limits of his or her mind, with the inevitable fear, attachment, and pettiness. These teachers and their students feel that the kind of precise and intense practice I am describing is painful. Yes, it is true that sometimes we experience pain during our practice as we exert ourselves and our will. Yoga is meant for the purification of body and its exploration as well as for the refinement of the mind. This demands strength of will both to observe and at the

same time to bear the physical pain without aggravating it. Without certain stress, the true asana is not experienced, and the mind will remain in its limitations and will not move beyond its existing frontiers. This limited state of mind can be described as the petty, small mind.

I remember two students who were top ballet dancers. They could achieve every position without encountering resistance or stress, so the journey to the final posture could teach them nothing. It was my job to take them back into the positions and show them how to create mobility with resistance in themselves so that they could work at the point of balance between the known and unknown. When we extend and expand our body consciousness beyond its present limitations, we are working on the frontier of the known toward the unknown by an intelligent expansion of our awareness. Ballet dancers have the opposite problem to most people in that, because of their excessive flexibility, their physical capacity outstrips their intellectual consciousness.

When we start practicing asanas, we experience both physical and mental pain. Just as we must learn to detect the difference between right physical pain and wrong physical pain, we must do the same with mental pain. Right mental pain should also be gradual and allow us to strengthen and not to snap. Getting up at six in the morning to do yoga before you go to work may seem painful, but it is constructive and involves challenging yourself to go beyond your present limits. However, we must remember to keep our practice progressive and gradual. If you try to get up so early that this pain will cause your body to rebel, say four in the morning, you will not be able to sustain the practice. In addition, if getting up at four in the morning causes you to be short of sleep and irritable with your family, you are being selfish and in addition are transferring your suffering to others. We use right pain like a vaccine against the unavoidable pain and suffering that life always sends our way, but the dose must be correct. Asana practice is an opportunity to look at obstacles in practice and life and discover how we can cope with them.

Many intellectually developed people are still emotionally immature. If they have to face pains, they try to escape from them. They are seldom prepared to face that pain and to work through it when they are taken intensely into a posture. This practice brings them face to face with the reality of their bodies' natures. We must face up to our emotions, not run away from them. We do not do yoga just for enjoyment; we do it for ultimate emancipation.

Most people want to take joy without suffering. I will take both. See how far suffering takes me. When you do not resist suffering, you will make friends with other people who suffer. I suffered a lot in my own body. Now when someone tells me of his sufferings, I feel in my body what that suffering is. My personal experience provides me with great love and compassion. So I say, "My friend, let me try and do something." Pain comes to guide you. When you have known pain, you will be compassionate. Shared joys cannot teach us this.

However, compassion does not mean pity. A surgeon operates on patients, which would be painful for the patients if they were not anaesthetized. As a yoga teacher, I have to operate when the patient is conscious. Obviously it is painful. But it is only in this way that we learn to act, to live, to grow. We all have presence of mind when everything goes well, but we need to have presence of mind when something goes wrong. If we face suffering and accept it as a necessary means, all anxiousness disappears.

Every illness is in reality a part of ourselves; it is a part of our manifestation. According to yogic philosophy, diseases and suffering are the fruits of our past actions. In that sense we are responsible for what we have created. If we confront affliction through yoga, we awaken a new awareness of tolerance and endurance, as well as a true sympathy for others in their afflictions. These qualities indicate the degree of development we have reached. So why not take adversity positively? Certainly it is an alarm signal, but it also contains the seed for its own resolution and transcendence.

In my life I count among my greatest blessings my early ill health, poverty, lack of education, and the harshness of my guru. Without these deprivations, I might never have held on so faithfully to yoga. When everything else is stripped away, the essential is revealed.

Of course, when you are young, it is particularly difficult to know what to hold on to and to have the determination and perseverance to do so. As a struggling youth in Pune, I clung to my yoga practice. As I have said, society as a whole thought anyone who wanted to make a career as a yoga teacher was mad as well as a good for nothing. The climate of opinion was that it was acceptable to become a priest or a renunciate, but yoga as a profession was beyond the pale. An even greater source of pain was my family's disapproval and ostracism. For example, coming from an ultra-orthodox background, I naturally had a *shendi*, the long tuft or lock of hair from the crown of the shaven head. In modern, westernized Pune, this was utterly scorned. My class of college students, all so strong and fit and bright, teased and ridiculed me mercilessly. Eventually I shaved my shendi off and adopted a modern haircut. This brought the wrath of my family down on me. They would not eat with me or allow me in their kitchens.

Hindus are also traditionally forbidden to cross the sea. After my first teaching trip to England in 1954, I stopped in Bangalore to pay my respects to my maternal uncle. He refused to even let me in the house. Is it any wonder I developed a defensive shield of haughtiness as a young man? Time has mellowed me, but in my youth haughtiness was the only way I knew to preserve myself in what seemed a hostile world. Yet this hostility also motivated me to become enduringly faithful to yoga.

Everyone sometimes finds themselves in the awful dilemma when every course of action or behavior seems to be wrong. Arjuna, in chapter 2 of the Bhagavad Gita is on the horns of such a dilemma. To do nothing is an action too, with inevitable consequences, and so that is not a way to escape pain and suffering either. With Krishna's help,

Arjuna follows the path of *dharma*, of the science of religious duty, and so reconciles what is on the human and material level, irreconcilable. In my own youth, it seemed impossible to be accepted by my students and by my family. But by persevering on the yogic path, I attained a level at which I am not only accepted but even now honored by my students and my family. This would have been impossible without the evolution that yoga provided.

In one instance, my trouble quickly turned into a great blessing. Because I was teaching so many women's and girls' classes, it was generally assumed I was guilty of immorality. I even had a row with my guru over this painfully false accusation. But it made me decide to marry even though I was in no financial position to do so, and I should say that my marriage to Ramamani *was* my greatest blessing. So it is by facing up to adversity and suffering, and accepting it as a necessary means, that our anxieties are resolved and disappear. If we are loyal to the path we are on, our lives will get better, and the light of distant perfection will come to illuminate our journeys.

Perfecting: Always Be Happy with the Smallest Improvement

Let the goal be to reach Perfection, but be content with a little progress toward perfection every day. Overambition can be destructive of sustainable progress. Perfection is ultimately only with God. So what is the value of perfection if it can be found only in God? We are creatures who can dream of perfection, and it is this dream that inspires one to improve. It is this dream that ignites the effort needed to transform. Perfection creates interest in art and life. The instinct that draws us toward the dream of perfection is really a desire for God.

Sometimes our body is willing, but our mind is weak and says, "We don't have time," or "Forget it, it's not worth all the effort." Sometimes it is our mind that is willing, but our body is weak and says,

“I’m really too tired for all this trouble.” A practitioner must focus between the mind and the body, listening to the counsel of each, but letting the intelligence and the soul make the true decision, for this is where real willpower and real dedication are found. Do to your capacity while always striving to extend your capacity. Ten minutes today. After a few days, twelve minutes. Master that, then again extend. It is better to do a good pose minimum than a bad pose maximum.

Do not say that you are disappointed with yourself. Find time every day to do something to maintain the asana practice. Sometimes both body and mind yield to willpower, and at other times they rebel. Do you have a problem part that makes the practice difficult for you? An injured knee? A stiff back? That is your problem child. Learn how to deal with it and how to nurture it, as you would a child who had problems that needed extra love and attention. Do not bother about failures either. Failures in life lead one toward determination and in having the necessary philosophical approach. Be detached. Look at me, I am not afraid, and I know there is no way to spare my difficulties. For me if it came yesterday, so much the better. If it comes after 20 years, it is also good. All is well.

Do not be afraid. Do not be attached to your body. Even if fear comes, accept it and find the courage to come through it. When you experience fear, you must practice without attachment to the body, thinking of it objectively as an opportunity for creative work. When fear is not there, you can treat the body more subjectively, as a part of yourself that nonetheless requires practice and cultivation.

Long uninterrupted practice of asanas and pranayama, done with awareness, makes the foundation firm and brings success. The young, the old, the extremely aged, even the sick and the infirm obtain perfection in yoga by constant practice. Success will come to the person who practices. Success in yoga is not obtained by the mere reading of sacred texts. These are increasingly essential aids but without practice

remain simply theoretical. The test of a philosophy is whether it is applicable and even more so applicable now in how you live your life. Even Patanjali, who was born a spiritual genius, said that yoga is mastered only by long persistent nonstop practice, with zeal and determination.

When the gardener plants an apple seed, does he expect the apples to appear at once? Of course not. The gardener waters the seed, watches each day, and feels happy seeing the growth. Treat the body in the same way. We water our asana and pranayama practice with love and joy seeing the small progress. While we know what the goal is, we do not focus on enlightenment. We know that when our practice is ripe, illumination comes. Patience allied with disciplined practices brings the required willpower.

Willpower is concrete, not ethereal. When you do something, you demonstrate your willpower, and it becomes all the easier to have the same power of will the next time. When you perform your asana, you are physically demonstrating willpower through the expression of the muscles. Willpower is not just in the mind, but it is also in the body. I have been known to slap a man's thigh and say, "Willpower is here." With willpower, you elongate the muscles and bring elegance. This willpower allows us to express peace, contentment, and freedom from body attachment as we expand our minds. Willpower is nothing but willingness to do.

You have to ask yourself, using your intelligence and your willpower, can I do a little better than I am doing? Light comes to a person who extends his awareness a little more than seems possible. We limit ourselves by settling. We say, "Oh, I do not want to go beyond this, because I know this is good." This is living in one's old mind. Question whether you can do a little more. Then immediately you experience that the movement is coming. If you are conscientious, your conscience whispers, "Try to go a little further." If one keeps one's aim to the maximum, Self-knowing will come. I say this because

your mind and intelligence move deeper toward the inner body, bringing the mind closer to the Self—the core of being. The moment one goes a little more than the body wants to take, one is nearer the Self. The minute one says, “I am satisfied,” the light of awareness and attention is fading.

The role of memory in asana practice is to allow us to compare yesterday’s practice with today’s so we can see if we are progressing in the right direction. But many people repeat what they have learned in the past, and their presentation of asanas becomes mechanical, which causes the body and mind to stagnate. An asana is not a posture that can ever be assumed mechanically. It involves thought and therefore innovation and improvisation, at the end of which a balance is achieved between movement and resistance. Never repeat: A repetition makes the mind dull. You must always animate and create interest in what you are doing. To illustrate my point, I will sometimes assume a standing asana in front of the class, and I will tell them that what I have done is a perfect asana. Nobody can tell me it has any defect. It is perfect in appearance but dead inside; my mind is elsewhere. Then I redo the asana with my mind fully present. I create unity within me, and I make them see the attention of the legs, torso, and senses of perception. They are perceptively different.

Do not allow past experiences to be imprinted on your mind. Perform asanas each time with a fresh mind and with a fresh approach. If you are repeating what you did before, you are living in the memory, so you are living in the past. That means you don’t want to proceed beyond the experience of the past. Retaining that memory is saying, “Yesterday I did it like that.” When I ask, “Is there anything new from what I did yesterday?” then there is progress. Am I going forward or am I going backward? Then you understand how to create dynamism in a static asana. That memory has to be used as a springboard from which you can ask yourself, “What more can I do than what I did yesterday?” This is equally true in life as in asana practice. Usually when a person

has mastered an asana, it becomes uninteresting. That is why you can see many people mechanically doing the same thing over and over again, but their minds are elsewhere. Blind spots develop, and you cannot savor the asana. It is not the right approach. People think they have attained the end. How can they know? It may be only a beginning. You must always see if you can cross the line of past experiences. You have to create within yourself the feeling of beauty, liberation, and infinity. These can be experienced only in the present.

As we grow more adept and asanas come to us, it becomes tempting to contain our practice within a zone of proficient complacency. I call this “*bhoga yoga*,” or yoga exclusively for pleasure. No longer do we employ the mirror of reflexive intelligence to seek out and correct imperfection; we use it for the purpose of self-regarding vanity. The yogic journey is becalmed in the doldrums. If there is no wind in our sails, the only way out is to row. This means to reapply ourselves to zealous, effortful, sustained practice, to lay down a new challenge. What is wrong? Where and how can I improve? This is where the fire of practice (*tapas*) ignites the lamp of intelligence, and self-knowledge (*svadhyaya*) dawns. The word *tapas* contains the meaning of inner intellectual heat, which burns out our impurities.

If we ever find ourselves apart from or superior to others, purer or more elevated by yoga, we can be sure that we are becalmed or even drifting back into a state of ignorance. It was Ramanuja, the saint and philosopher, who, more than nine hundred years ago, exposed the Brahminical misconception that we can be “above” others. On the contrary, practice and purity of life place us “among” not above. Just as we have discussed inner integration within our own bodies, this naturally leads to integration with all other life. Integrity means one. One is the number that can go into all other numbers. The fully sensitive and sensible being becomes not a “somebody” but the common denominator of humanity. This takes place only when the intelligence of the head is transformed by humility and the wisdom of the heart and compassion is kindled.

If there is an end, then there is no God. Creation by God never ends, so creation of your movements never ceases. The moment you say, “I have got it,” you have lost everything you had. As soon as something comes, you have to go one step further. Then there is evolution. The moment you say, “I am satisfied with that,” that means stagnation has come. That is the end of your learning; you have closed the windows of your intellect. So let me do what I cannot do, not what I can do. You have always to do a little bit more than you think you can, in quality and in quantity. This is what leads ultimately to beauty and greatness.

As you take great pains to learn, continue with devotion in what you have learned. Learning is very difficult, but it is twice as difficult to keep the ground gained. Soldiers say that it is easier to win a battle than to occupy the territory conquered. While I continually try to improve my practice, I do my best and am contented with what I am able to attain. Even as the body ages and is able to do less, there are subtleties that reveal themselves, which would be invisible to younger or more athletic bodies. You have to create love and affection for your body, for what it can do for you. Love must be incarnated in the smallest pore of the skin, the smallest cell of the body, to make them intelligent so they can collaborate with all the other ones, in the big republic of the body.

This love must radiate from you to others. Practitioners of the asanas alone often forget that yoga is for cultivating the head and heart. Patanjali talked about friendliness, compassion, gladness, and joy. Friendliness and grace are two qualities that are essential for the yoga student. In yoga class, students often look so serious and so separate from one another. Where is the friendliness? Where is the compassion? Where is the gladness? Where is the joy? Without these, we have not achieved the true yoga of Patanjali.

You must purge yourself before finding faults in others. When you see a mistake in somebody else, try to find if you are making the same

mistake. This is the way to take judgment and to turn it into improvement. Do not look at others' bodies with envy or with superiority. All people are born with different constitutions. Never compare with others. Each one's capacities are a function of his or her internal strength. Know your capacities and continually improve upon them.

Over time the intensity with which one can practice develops. Yoga identifies four levels of intensity of practice, which relate to the twin aspects of exertion and penetration. Exertion, or our effort through practice, generates the energy, which we need for the journey to penetrate to the core of our being. The first level of intensity is one we all know in which we exert ourselves only a little, perhaps do one class a week and find reasons not to practice at home. We all have to begin yoga somewhere. Mild practice is not bad practice, and it is better to sustain what we can do than to collapse and give up. Naturally this mild investment does not pay big dividends, and in relation to penetration our awareness remains rudimentary and peripheral. We will know, for example, that we can touch our ankles and not our toes.

If we increase our application and devote more time and effort, we will be able to consider ourselves decent average practitioners, not always consistent, but nevertheless the inner structure of our body and organs will begin to reveal itself. We will feel fiber and sinew, liver stretch (as in back bends), and heart's repose.

The next stage is determined and intense. Our inward gaze becomes refined, insightful, judicious, and discerning. We will become aware of our thoughts flickering and how the movement of breath ruffles or calms the consciousness. Our intelligence will awaken to the point where it can see things in their true light and make a myriad of meaningful choices both in life and practice.

The highest level is characterized as relentless, inexorable, a total investment of oneself in practice. It is almost unknown for anyone to be able to plunge into this level from the beginning. Probably the cir-

cumstances of life would not allow it initially, but over time it can be reached. Our insight can now finally penetrate through all the tortuous subtleties of cunning ego, our wisdom matures, and we touch the core of being.

The point of such a scale or ladder of intensity is not to make us feel inadequate but for reference purposes, so that we can truly and honestly see where we are and how we are doing. It is analogous to the Biblical parable of the talents of silver that a lord distributed to his servants. Those who fully invested them energetically and wisely were able to return the silver to their lord tenfold and were duly honored. The servant who merely hid his silver away in the ground was able to do no more than return what he had received. His lord was displeased. We all receive God-given talents, and it is our duty to develop them energetically to realize their full potential, otherwise it is as if we are turning our nose up at the gifts of life. But more than that, our talents, however much they may vary from individual to individual, when realized to the full, provide the link that will take us back to a reunion with the divine.

Divine Yoga: Do the Asana with Your Soul

In asana and pranayama practice, we should have the impression we are working on the outer to get closer to the inner reality of our existence. This is true. We work from the periphery to the core. The material body has a practical reality that is accessible. It is here and now, and we can do something with it. However, we must not forget that the innermost part of our being is also trying to help us. It wants to come out to the surface and express itself.

In the example of triangle pose (*Trikonasana*), we notice that, because of the relationship of the posture with our anatomy, we all fall into the same traps. Our body seems to be trying to collapse forward

to the floor. Our body does not want to open itself in the way we see in a perfectly expressed asana. So we apply ourselves and learn the adjustments that will cause the whole body to open. We extend and redress our arm, lengthen the chest, and open the pelvis. But we also, in the process of applied learning, open our mind and intelligence. An opening is like a doorway, and there is no such thing as a doorway that you can only go through one way. Yes, we are trying to penetrate in, but what is trying to come out to meet us? It is the light of the innermost sheath of bliss (*ananda*), which wants to shine out. Normally we are like a shuttered lantern; our light within invisible. As we create opening, this draws back the shutter, and the light of the lamp shines out.

In this regard, we should also consider how the heart of nature (*prakṛti*) is also willing to help us. The very life force of nature is an initiating power (*prerana*), a driving force, an incitement to creation. It hears our call and responds to it in proportion to the valor and determined intent with which it is invoked. It responds to the exercise of our willpower, so that an intense aspirant will receive higher benefits than a mild one. There is a saying that “God helps those who help themselves.” This is also true of nature.

When you do the asana correctly, the Self opens by itself; this is divine yoga. Here the Self is doing the asana, not the body or brain. The Self involves each and every pore of the skin. It is when the rivers of the mind and the body get submerged in the sea of the core that the spiritual discipline commences. There is no special spiritual discipline. When there is passivity, pensiveness, and tranquility of body and mind, do not stick there, but proceed. Here the spiritual experience in yoga commences. No doubt, one may say reading holy books is spiritual practice. But what I teach is spiritual practice in action. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, I use the body to discipline the mind and to reach the soul. Asanas, when done with the right intention, will help to transform an individual by taking the person away from an aware-

ness of just the body toward the consciousness of the soul. Indeed, as I often say, body is the bow, asana the arrow, and soul is the target.

An asana must be righteous and virtuous. By righteous I mean that it must be true. You must not cheat or pretend. You must fill every inch of your body with the asana from your chest and arms and legs to the tips of your fingers and toes so that the asana radiates from the core of your body and fills the entire diameter and circumference of your limbs. You must feel your intelligence, your awareness, and your consciousness in every inch of your body.

By virtuous I mean that it must be done with the right intention, not for ego or to impress but for the Self and to move closer to God. In this way the asana is a sacred offering. We are surrendering our egos. This is supreme devotion to God (*Isvara pranidhana*).

It must not be just your mind or even your body that is doing the asana. You must be in it. You must do the asana with your soul. How can you do an asana with your soul? We can only do it with the organ of the body that is closest to the soul—the heart. So a virtuous asana is done from the heart and not from the head. Then you are not just doing it, but you are in it. Many people try to think their way into an asana, but you must instead feel your way into it through love and devotion.

In this way, you will work from your heart, not your brain, to create harmony. The serenity in the body is the sign of spiritual tranquility. As long as you do not feel the serenity in the body, in each and every joint, there is no chance for emancipation. You are in bondage. So while you are sweating and aching, let your heart be light and let it fill your body with gladness. You are not only becoming free, but you are also being free. What is not to be glad about? The pain is temporary. The freedom is permanent.

In the next chapter, we proceed deeper from the body to the breath, from flesh to vital energy. We will learn more about the role of our energy and of our breath in the next stage of the Inward Journey.

The energy body, *pranamaya kosa*, is the sheath in which we begin to cultivate our breath and also our emotions. We must master the human emotions that we all experience just as we have discussed how to master the human body that we are all born with. Before one can hope to quiet the mind and glimpse the soul, one must learn the breathing practices and deal with the Six Emotional Disturbances—lust, anger, greed, obsession, pride, and hatred—which so often become recurring obstacles on the journey.