

Progressive Practice
from consciousness of the sole to consciousness of the soul

“The effect of yoga depends upon one’s motivations.” - BKS Iyengar

Aim high. For wherever we repeatedly put our time and efforts, it is there we will go. But do we have yoga’s goal in mind when we practice? Do we know and aim for yoga’s waypoints on the path to it’s goal? Does our goal and plan correspond to that of yoga and to what Guruji taught? Let’s become familiar with these waypoints and goal by using an analogy: a potter and his pots.

The Gheranda Samhita calls this yoga as ‘Ghatayoga ’ (Ghata = Pot) for the body is likened to a pot or vessel whose content is the soul. We, the potter, form this pot into different shapes which we call asanas. We bake each pot in the fire of tapas to make these pots useful: to hold the soul.

Bhairanga Sadhana - external quest

We all begin at the beginning. An aspiring potter wants to “make” pots just as a beginner in yoga wants to “do” the poses. Their struggle is one of acquiring the ability to “do.” Many attempts are required.

The first stage:

The beginner in yoga should strive to attain freedom of the body so that the poses are done with ease. To attain this freedom, “movement” based work on the areas required is best. Or as Geetaji has said:

“Work has to be completed first before the Sthirata comes. We go for stability before putting in required efforts for freedom of the body. And this is why the asanas don’t come. Stability has to come after the movement. Work has to be done on the area required, then you have to see the stability comes.”¹

But what is this “movement” based work? You can often see this kind of movement based work at RIMYI in the beginners classes and in the children’s classes but somehow it has not taken hold outside of India. Some examples of this type of work are:

- Rope 1 dynamic
- jumpings
- a flowing sequence of poses
- quickly going from Uttanasana to Adho Mukha Vrksasana many times or
- Paschimottanasana to Halasana many times
- going into Marichyasana 3 quickly many times on one side only, then same on the other side

These are all examples of motion based work which often has one or more of these characteristics:

1. repetition (many)
2. speed
3. momentum
4. heat
5. full range of movement
6. low or no duration of holding (“touch & go”)

¹ Yoganusasanam 2015 Day 9 (please see the video for further elucidation)

7. moving with the breath
8. fewer instructions
9. drishti (looking in the direction of the movement to attain full range of movement)

But the ability to bend in any way desired does not make one a yogi anymore than the ability to read makes one a scholar. If it did, than every acrobat would be a yogi... but this is far from true. Freedom of the body is a necessary prerequisite for yoga just as reading is a prerequisite for a scholar. So what then follows freedom of the body?

Antaranga Sadhana - inner quest

Having attained freedom of the body (at least in some poses) the aspirant qualifies (in those poses) for the work on stability (sthirata). This is the first, internal, hidden stage in yoga. In it, the potter abandons all vanity about how the pot looks and instead takes interest in whether the pot is well suited for its job of containing water. An entirely new set of questions fill the mind of the potter:

- What shape must it have to fill easily and smoothly without splashing?
- What must I do to keep the water from dissolving/harming the clay?
- How can I keep the clay from polluting the water?

New aims beget new means. The potter no longer sees the pot from the perspective of the viewer but from the perspective of the water.

The second stage:

At this level, like the potter, the practitioner of yoga takes care to skillfully mold the inner layer of the body to give room to and follow the shape of the inner body. But how do you go from movement, freedom of the body and a focus on “getting” the pose to action, freedom of the spirit and a focus on being “gotten” (absorbed) by the pose? How do you even feel this “inner body” let alone adjust your outer body to it?

The answer here is to add resistance at the source of action. What is this “source of action?” The source of action is characterized by one or more of these:

1. It is the place in the body from where the movement begins/is initiated
2. On movement, the feeling of “I” momentarily arises there
3. It is often the part that moves the most

Sometimes a pose has one source of action, sometimes more than one. Each pose has its own source of action which may be the same or different from other poses. Lastly, different steps entering into the same pose can have different sources of action at each step. Here is a simple example of source of action. In Virabhadrasana 2 the source of action is the head of the shin of the leg that is bending. When one bends the knee from Parsva Hasta Padasana it is the head of the shin that initiates this bending; it is the head of the shin that moves the most and it is the head of the shin where the “I” consciousness momentarily arises and then is extinguished. Normally the movement is faster than the “I” consciousness and in outrunning it the “I” consciousness doesn’t have time to spread. But, if one resists the head of the shin while bending, the “I” consciousness has time to spread from the source of action through the body to the back leg. When that happens you may feel as if a wave is passing quickly through you from the source of action towards the back foot. It is as though your body is a hollow vessel and there is a fluid moving inside of you. This movement of the inner fluid can be easily perceived by the mind and draws the mind into the inner body.

Normally the speed of the body is slow, that of the mind is quick but that of the soul is instantaneous. Because the nature of the body is physical and slow whereas the nature of mind is mental and quick, the mind has difficulty penetrating and remaining in contact with the body for any length of time. The body and mind are like oil and vinegar; you can make them mix but they are of such dissimilar natures that they must eventually separate. This is why we can concentrate on a few points but as the teacher adds newer points we begin to forget the original points. The intelligence of our mind is limited and on its own can not spread very far and stay unified very long with the body. But Guruji has said:

“Intelligence is in every cell of the body, but dormant; you have to learn how to tap it.”

Using resistance at the source of action is one way to tap it. The dormant intelligence in the cellular body comes to the surface with its own consciousness. It is an entirely separate intelligence from that of the head. Now the intelligence of the head can get absorbed and united with the awakened intelligence of the body since they are now of similar substance: intelligence & intelligence. No longer oil and water - they are both water.

The struggle at this stage is to awaken the dormant intelligence in the cellular body to bring it to the speed of the mind and in the next stage to bring both to the speed of the Soul.²

If we think about it, using motion first for freedom of the body and then action for penetration toward the Self was Guruji's sequence of development. Guruji started with what is now called ashtanga yoga as taught by Sri T. Krishnamacharya. That was and is a motion based system. In Guruji's 1938 practice film, you can see that he became quite flexible using a motion based system. Guruji has said that only much later did he hit upon the idea of “action” which he defined as "motion + intelligence.” Not the intelligence from the head, but the awakening of the dormant intelligence in the body.

Antaratma Sadhana - innermost quest

Having experienced and experimented with the inner body in a myriad of poses and pranayamas the aspirant surrenders the will and follows the dictates of the conscience when responding to the inner body. Conscious practice has yielded to conscientious practice where the conscience is guiding spontaneously, naturally and instantly - not the will. Mind goes to the background and becomes passive. Effort becomes effortless and witness consciousness ensues. Room is given where room is needed and the outer form exactly follows the contours of the inner form on a moment by moment basis. A slight gap of air between the inner body and the outer insulates the senses from external distractions. The gravitational pull of the senses being left behind, the aspirant's senses turn inward and get deeply absorbed by the gravity of the inner body. Borders dissolve, disappear and the inner body opens out into a universe of space. Or as Guruji has said:

“The infinite space in the body is the soul”³

And though philosophically we think of the soul as “non-doer,” Guruji's has also said

“Let me act with my soul; let my soul come in communion with the body.”⁴

² Light on the Yoga Sutras 3.49

³ BKS Iyengar Estes Park 2005 Guruji speaking about pranayama - 8:34 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ba0yIAZ9ok

⁴ Sparks of Divinity 18.70

and

“Divine Yoga: Do the Asana with Your Soul”⁵

So after involuting and reaching the soul, the soul then radiates out towards the body in a process of evolution. The pose becomes a divine asana - a radiation from the soul. Body and mind stand equal to the soul because they are transparent to it.⁶ Body and mind become like a pot of pure crystal, perfectly transparent and indistinguishable from the water within.

While not much advice can be given about this evolutionary radiation of the soul outwards towards the body, some practical advice can be given about the involutory path. The key here is to create a small gap between the inner body and the outer body. Between the outer surface of the inner body and the inner surface of the outer body a small gap of air should be maintained so that the outer body closely follows the contours of the inner body but nowhere touches it. At first your mind does this job but later it is the conscience which takes on this task. Maintaining this gap results in a kind of pratyahara from the body/senses. Then, the consciousness which has been released from the gravity of the body and senses is free to follow - without oscillations - the gravity of the soul. No oscillations occur because there is but a single gravity acting on the consciousness: the gravity of the soul. The air gap prevents the body and senses from acting on the consciousness so that the soul can be reached. Or as Gururji has said:

“Asanas, when done with the right intention, will help to transform the individual by taking the person away from an awareness 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.”⁷

So at this stage in asana, work to remove all the abscesses and dents in the body so that the inner body is perfectly and evenly full and the outer body exactly follows its every contour without touching it. Abscesses are places where the flesh pushes out to hit the skin. Dents are places where the flesh goes in away from the skin. The first is over doing, the latter, under doing.

For example, when doing Sarvangasana, the flesh of the middle upper back tends to poke backwards and hit the skin whereas the flesh of the inner shin and inner arch of the foot tend to shrink away from the skin. Both types of mistakes must be corrected. It is as though one carefully places and adjusts the inner and outer body like Russian dolls: one within the other without touching. This is called “placing & spacing.” Then one attains a kind of bodiless state free from the gravity of the body/senses and able to follow the call of the soul.

I have left out so many intermediate stages, techniques and their interconnections like:

- alignment
- sequencing
- timing
- sense of direction
- median plane
- extension & expansion
- conative & cognitive

⁵ Light on Life pg. 61

⁶ simplified paraphrase of Light on the Yoga Sutras 3.49

⁷ Light on Life pg. 62

circulation of skin
rhythmic stretching
flesh to the bone
radial point
brain of the pose
container & content
psycho & soma
tracing prakrti
dykes
Sapta Dhatus
cell culture
zero pressure
bimba pratibimba
panchamahabhutas
gunas
mudra/locks
and many, many more....

Yet my fond hope is that this is enough for you to get a sense of the path of practice, its major waypoints, trajectory and goal. I hope you will be encouraged to aim your practice a little higher, to struggle, fail, struggle again, fail better and continue further along this path. I hope that this path which has been so beautifully laid out for us all by Guruji and transmitted with clarity and zeal by Geetaji and Prashantji inspires you, gives you hope, fills you with awe, wonder, joy and gratitude for what one man has brought out from a lifetime of ceaseless efforts and given to us all with an open hand. I hope in the fullness of time you come to realize and appreciate more and more the tremendous depth and worth of his amazing and timeless gift to us all, to all of humanity, now and forever. He is with us still.

I wish for you all success in your yogic practices.

Jai Guruji

In his light,

Eddy Marks
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