

Yoga as Self-Transformation

An American Hatha Yoga master details the common problems of daily practice and offers practical advice to students on how to persevere and enjoy working on yourself.

By Joel Kramer

For thousands of years, yoga has been a tool to open the mind and body, bringing transformation. At its core, yoga is a process that involves confronting your limits and transcending them. It is a psychophysical approach to life and to self-understanding that can be creatively adapted to the needs of the times.

Yoga transforms you by opening up the physical and mental binds that block your potential, limiting your life. Transformation is a process that brings newness and interest. You might think that changing deeply could make you so different that you'd lose touch with those you love and even yourself. Actually, the transformation that yoga brings makes you more yourself, and opens you up to loving with greater depth. It involves a honing and refining which releases your true essence, as a sculptor brings out the beauty of form in the stone by slowly and carefully chipping away the rest.

Doing yoga brings many concrete benefits: it's a powerful therapeutic tool for correcting physical and psychological problems; it retards aging and keeps you opened sexually; it gives strength and flexibility for other physical activities; it can enhance your looks, posture, skin and muscle tone, and vitality; and it can give your life a sense of grace and overall well-being.

At its deepest level, yoga involves generating energy. Energy is often thought of as a mysterious force which is either there or not, and out of your control. But through yoga, you can actually change its quality and generate more of it, by enlarging the body's capacity as an energy transformer. Everyone has experienced different qualities of energy.

Sometimes "scattered" or agitated – you're off in different directions at once. Yet, at other times, you may also have great energy and be very focused and calm. Yoga involves learning to generate energy, and also to focus it into different parts of

your body. This enables you to break through physical and psychological blocks, increasing energy, which allows new interest to come into your life. At any instant, the quality of your life is directly related to how interested you are in it. Yoga involves far more than either having or developing flexibility. Being able to do complicated postures doesn't necessarily mean you know how to do yoga. The essence of yoga is not attainments, but how awarely you work with your limits – wherever and whatever they may be. The important thing is not how far you get in any given pose, but how you approach the yogic process, which in turn is directly related to how your mind views yoga.

There are different basic frameworks of mind – what I call "headsets" that people bring to yoga. One involves viewing a posture as an end to be achieved, a goal: how far you get in the posture is what counts. Another one views the posture as a tool to explore and open the body. Instead of using the body to "get" the posture, you use the posture to open the body. Whichever framework you're in greatly influences how you do each posture.

Approaching postures as goals makes you less sensitive to the messages the body is sending. If your mind is primarily on the goal, the gap between where you are and where you want to be can bring tension and hinder movement. You push too hard and fast instead of allowing your body to open at its own pace. Paradoxically, if you're oriented toward the process instead of the end results, progress and opening come naturally. Postures can be achieved through struggle, but the struggle itself limits both your immediate opening and how far you ultimately move in yoga.

Valuing "progress" is a deep part of our conditioning. It's natural to enjoy progress, but problems come when your yoga is attached at its core to results, instead of to the daily process of opening and generating energy. This attachment imposes one of the real limits to your yoga. Many of you have probably noticed how your yoga is cyclical, in the sense that you're into it, then out of it, then into it again, and so on. One reason

for this involves being subtly hooked into accomplishments. When you're improving, it turns you on, and you're motivated as long as you continue to improve. When you "plateau" – as we all on occasion do – you need all the energy it took to improve just to maintain where you are. If your main incentive is progress, the lack of improvement can cause you to lose interest. Consequently, you may do less or no yoga until you close up and your body complains. Then you do yoga to feel better, and again you improve until once more you hit a plateau.

The quality of mind that you bring to yoga is of utmost importance. In fact, most of the real limits that you confront in yoga live in the mind, not the body. People think they are limited by their body's endurance – that tiring is purely physical. I have found it is usually not the body that tires first, but rather, the mind which loses the stamina required for attention. When your mind tires, your attention wanes and begins to wander, and sensitivity to your body's messages diminishes. You treat the body with less care, and this tires it more quickly. Yoga involves a balance between "control" and "surrender" – between pushing and relaxing, channeling energy and letting go, so the energy can move you. I have found there are basically two personality types in yoga. I call them the "pushers" and the "sensualists." The pushers are more into control and progress – the sensualists into surrender and relaxation. As yoga truly means balance, if your tendency is to push, you must also learn to let go, relax, and enjoy the sensuality of the stretch. If your tendency is to relax, and be "laid back," you must learn to experience the turn on of pushing your edges and using control to generate energy.

The art of yoga lies in learning how to focus and generate energy into different parts of the body, in listening to the body's messages (feedback), and in surrendering to where the energy leads you. The body's resistance should be respected, since it is useful feedback. Trying to conquer resistance and push past pain is actually another form of resistance – resistance to your own limits, to what and where you are now. When you change your focus from "resisting resistance" to channeling energy into where the limits lie, your body can follow its own flow and open on its own, with minimal resistance. Trying forcibly to push past your limits actually creates more resistance and tension, whereas surrendering to the posture ultimately draws you into far greater depth. The body will tell you when to move and deepen if you listen to it.

Another important aspect in my approach to yoga involves understanding "conditioning." Just as doing yoga is playing the edge between control and surrender, there is also an interplay between transformation and resistance to change. There's no way to remain the way you are now: you either become more rigid and crystallized, or you break out of patterns and transform. The conditioning process brings habits in the mind and body that accumulate over time. These patterns define

you – the way you move, hold your body, what you think and even when you think. As you age, the habit taking-on process makes you more rigid both physically and mentally. Your internal systems function less efficiently and your body's movements are more limited.

I am not presenting conditioning as a villain to be done away with, for it serves important functions in people's lives, as well as in the universe. Conditioning and its ensuing habits are part of the universal process of individuation. Individual entities, all of us, are systems with self-protective mechanisms that define boundaries and keep them intact. The way we build security in our life involves habits that we are often not conscious of. Some habits are necessary. They become dangerous if we unconsciously let them direct our lives. Repeating habits over time tends to put you on automatic like a machine, and filters how you relate to the present. If your habits are rigid and deep in the unconscious, the filter is very cloudy and you miss the present. If you miss the present, you miss all there really is.

Experience conditions you, leaving a mark, an imprint.



A variation on the twist.

Photo by: Mark Wexler

Memory lives in the cells, in the systems of the body, in the brain, and in thought itself. The paradox of experience is that it both teaches you and limits you. It expands your horizons, and is the ground or matrix from which transformation can occur. At the same time, it also builds habits in the mind and body which narrow and confine you. For instance, if you pull a muscle in yoga, this experience can teach you how applying too much force may stem from greed or inattention. It can also create habits in your yoga. You can consciously or unconsciously avoid the area. Or, if you approach the injured muscle, the fear of hurting yourself again may bring tension that closes it further. As this is repeated, the muscle learns to close to protect itself from anticipated pain. A habit is formed.

There are habits in yoga as in everything you do repeatedly, but awareness of the nature of habits helps you avoid being automatically pushed by them. Doing postures like mechanical exercises turns yoga into calisthenics, which dulls the adventure and passion that is part of the transformative process. Resistance to doing yoga is often feedback that your practice has become stale and habit-bound.

“Feedback-sensitivity” is the capacity to listen to and understand the messages the different parts of the body are sending. This sensitivity is not only crucial in avoiding injuries or healing them, but it enables you to have greater control over the yogic process. For example, it is only through feedback sensitivity that you can know when to move deeper into an area or when to back off the pose.

Physical Aspects

Before going into my approach to doing physical yoga, I would like to describe how yoga affects your well-being. Infants are flexible; their bodies move easily. As you age, you tighten and this tightness surrounds the nerves, glands, circulatory system, the spine and energy systems. The body then becomes less efficient; energy wanes as systems slow down or get blocked. The body is less sensitive and less in touch with itself – more coated and dulled. Since a basic dimension of life is movement on all levels, the very quality of life is dimmed.

The word “disease” means what it literally says: dis-ease. As the body becomes less “easy” in itself, it begins to break down. The process of yoga keeps the physical systems opened and energized which prevents breakdown and illness. Yoga also has great curative potential since the postures are highly refined tools. They enable you to get into different bodily systems in very specific ways, strengthening and healing them. Yoga gives you the possibility of taking your health into your own hands.

Many people only concern themselves with health when it’s gone. They lack the interest or the ability to stay in touch with

the state of their various systems, until it’s too late and breakdown occurs. Doing yoga can alert you when your reservoir of energy first begins to go down, as well as give you the means to replenish it. The preventative power of yoga is greatly aided by the fact that yoga builds sensitivity to internal feedback, helping you detect early warnings. You can then, through yoga, learn to heal yourself long before breakdown occurs.

Yoga has been called a “fountain of youth” because it brings health and vitality, but this is a misnomer. The search for a fountain of youth, whether through magic, drugs, or techniques, indicates a resistance to the aging process. I prefer to call yoga a “fountain of life.” Aging is inevitable. Yoga allows you to approach it awarably as a transformative process that can bring growth and new depths with maturation. Resisting aging is actually resisting transformation and growth. Paradoxically, the resistance to aging, which includes holding on to old, inappropriate ways of living, exacerbates the very aging process you fear.

In yoga you confront the living/dying process that expresses itself in aging. Youth is a time of innocence when the body maintains and even increases its energy fund automatically. Then there comes a time, usually in the late 20’s or 30’s, when this process reverses so that the body, left to its own devices, begins gradually to lose energy. It’s possible, however, to age with continued increase in the power and efficiency of your energy. This does not happen by itself. You must deal consciously and awarably with the automatic tendencies of closure (entropy) in your body. Yoga not only counters the entropic process of breakdown, but it opens you up in new ways, bringing a way of maturing and developing with elegance, depth and richness.

Doing yoga in the morning puts you in direct touch with how you have been treating yourself on the previous day. You learn to read subtle differences in flexibility, endurance, and energy. The body has its own intelligence, and being able to listen to and learn from that intelligence is an essential part of yoga. Through this paying attention, yoga can align and remold the structure of your body according to an inner sense of what it needs.

Techniques of Yoga

Yoga, both as an accumulated body knowledge and as an art, involves learning and refining technique. Teachers are useful in helping expand your technical repertoire, which in turn enhances your potential for creative self-expression in yoga. Technique enables you to work the body in deeper ways, and it also helps hone focus and attention. However, it is important to keep in mind that although technique has its own aesthetic quality – its own beauty – it is a means for transformation, not an end in itself.

Attention & Focus

The essence of yoga is focus and attention – attention to breath, to the body’s messages, to energy, and even to the quality of your attention. Over the years, I have found that the way I do yoga is continually changing. Deepening your practice is not so much learning to do more advanced postures, but rather increasing your understanding of how to do yoga. Precision in technique can make yoga, even in very basic postures, more focused and exciting, and can deepen your understanding of what yoga is about.

Learning to do yoga is, among other things, learning to love doing it. Not necessarily all the time, but as a general presence in your life. You can love someone who on occasion frustrates or angers you, yet the love remains underneath. If you’ve been doing yoga for some time and you don’t love doing it, this in itself is an indication that the way you are approaching it should be questioned. At any place in a posture, are you turned on, interested in being there? If you find you’re not, this most likely means your mind is somewhere else.

Perhaps you’re stoically enduring the pose so you can feel you’ve done what you “should” or “what’s good for you.” You could also be struggling to achieve the final goal, which may be a completed posture, or yesterday’s level of flexibility. If your attention and interest are not in the body, you are not fully present in the posture.

Attention in yoga involves letting go, a relaxation that surrenders to the “what is” of the posture. Here you are alert and watchful, but not passive. It’s the body that “decides” when to hold, when to back off, when to deepen, and when to come out of the posture.

Yoga develops the ability to focus energy into specific areas, which generates energy whether you’re stretching or relaxing in a pose. Learning to focus energy with great depth and pre-

cision is a vital part of yoga that is often not emphasized. This ability does not depend on flexibility, but rather on a quality of mind that is able consciously to sense the body for tightnesses and blocks, and then focus into them.

By “attention” I mean a broadening of the spectrum of awareness, which occurs when the mind lets go of control and direction. “Focus” is more one-pointed than attention and, of course, involves control. Although focus and attention are different, they are intimately connected. It is through being attentive that you learn where to focus, and deeper focus brings a capacity for a greater attention. This is another way that yoga plays between control and surrender.

Breath

Breath is the fuel of life (traditionally called “prana”). In yoga it serves as a bridge between the mind and the body, since it operates on automatic and can also be consciously controlled.

Breath is a cornerstone of technique. Learning to use it effectively is a key to deepening your yoga, since it directly increases stretch, strength, endurance and balance. I use a variation of “ujjayi,” which is deep-chest breathing that lengthens the breath through glottal control. The pull of lungs across the glottis on inhale and the push of lungs on exhale help you move in the postures and deepen them, while at the same time relaxing you. In postures that involve folding, compacting, and forward-bending, you move and stretch on the exhale while holding and relaxing, or aligning on the inhale. Conversely, stretches that expand the lungs and chest are done on the inhale, relaxing or aligning on the exhale.

Breath itself is an interesting lesson in control and surrender. By using breath, instead of the mind, to guide and control movement and stretch, the body can let go, surrendering to the



The Scorpion.

Photo by: Jackie Stein

posture more easily. When breath and body are coordinated, so they are moving as one, energy flows into the musculature, totally changing the quality of yoga. The proper use of breath gets you out of your mind and into your body, bringing a grace and sensuality to movement impossible when the mind is in control. This way of using breath gives a relaxed and centered attention to the whole organism, and can also be used to focus energy into different parts of the body.

Playing Edges

Another important dimension in yoga is learning how to “play the edge.” The body has edges that mark its limits in stretch, strength, endurance, and balance. The flexibility edge can be used to illustrate this. In each posture, at any given time, there is a limit to stretch that I call the final or “maximum edge.” This edge has a feeling of intensity, and is right before pain, but it is not pain itself. The edge moves from day to day and from breath to breath. It does not always move forward; sometimes it retreats. Part of learning how to do yoga is learning how to surrender to this edge, so that when it changes you move with the change. It is psychologically easier to move forward than to back off. But it’s as important to learn to move back if your edge closes, as it is to learn to move forward slowly as the body opens.

There is a subtle psychological addiction to a completed pose, or at least to our maximum extensions. The tendency to push toward maximum extension quickly, puts you out of touch with the body’s feedback and makes you come out of the posture sooner. Out of the memory of how flexible I was yesterday, I can be unconsciously pushing toward that remembered level of flexibility, being content if I meet it, enthused if I surpass it, and disappointed if I cannot reach it.

Each posture ideally involves the whole body, even though postures usually have one or more major areas where the stretch is most deeply felt. If you reach for your maximum edge too quickly, you bypass many areas. This gives the illusion of a completed stretch, but the body may not be properly aligned, nor really as open as it can be. Opening the ancillary areas of the body before you reach for maximum extension, helps insure proper alignment and ultimately deepens the major stretch.

There is another less obvious edge that is very easy to miss: I call it the first or “minimum edge.” This edge occurs while moving into the posture where the body meets its very first resistance. In beginning a pose, initially you move with ease until the first hint of the sensation of blockage or holding appears. This is the first edge, and it’s very important to stop here to acclimatize yourself, realign the posture, and become aware of your breath and deepen it. Your attention should be in the feeling, waiting for it to diminish, at which point the body will automatically move to greater depth and a new edge will

appear. This process repeats itself until you eventually reach your final edge. By this time, your body has opened with minimal resistance or effort. Often the more slowly and carefully you treat your early edges, the deeper your final edge will be. Building endurance involves staying longer at the early edges and moving slowly toward intensity, for the closer you are to your final edge, the less endurance you tend to have. Also learning to hold the posture at intermediary edges until you can deepen and slow the breath, enables you to relax along the way. Playing edges slowly in this fashion has the advantage of giving you better alignment throughout the whole process, and a sharper capacity to listen to feedback, which enables you to enjoy greater levels of intensity without pain, and minimizes the possibility of injury. Edge-playing also allows you to get in touch with the sensual nature of the posture and the quality of feeling in the stretch, so that each pose can become an aesthetic experience.

Pain & Feedback

It is vital to know the difference between pain and intensity. The line between them might sometimes appear nebulous, but it is actually well defined by the state of your mind. Pain is not only physical, but psychological, too, for it involves a judgment of discomfort – not liking to be there. If you are running from the feeling, it’s pain. Intensity that is not pain generates an energy and sensuous quality that turns you on.

Fear and ambition can often cloud the difference between pain and intensity. If you’re afraid of hurting yourself, low levels of feeling can be interpreted as pain and therefore avoided, whereas ambition can make you ignore or tolerate pain. If you are fearful in a posture, it is wise not to try to override the fear in order to be “courageous,” since this makes injuring yourself more likely, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead you can play on the edge of fear: find a place in the posture where you’re not afraid, but near where the fear comes in; hold this position, deepen the breath, and wait for relaxation to come and the body to open. Only then do you move forward. If you are aware of being ambitious in a posture, I strongly recommend you stay with your first edge longer and move through your intermediary edges slower. This will bring a feedback sensitivity that can help counter the tendency to ignore the body’s messages.

Pain is often hard to recognize as it isn’t necessarily sharp or intense, nor does great intensity always mean pain. If the feeling is such that you are trying to get away from it, it’s pain. If you are afraid, even at relatively low levels of intensity, this is your edge, by definition. You can become less fearful by opening slowly, rather than pushing past psychological limits.

Running away from pain can take different forms: stoically enduring, waiting to get the posture over with, thinking of

something else, or rushing the posture. These states are often feedback indicating discomfort. Pain causes inattention in the pose, actually increasing the likelihood of overextending the body and pulling a muscle. Most injuries in yoga are brought about by ambition or inattention – usually both. Ambition in a posture takes many forms: holding it a prescribed length of time, trying to stretch as far as someone else, unconsciously reaching for remembered levels of flexibility, or trying to achieve or reproduce psychic states. Ambition is a characteristic of thought, and therefore a fact of life, as is comparison. You cannot eliminate ambition through effort, for the very effort is ambition. Awarely playing the different edges turns your attention away from ambition to the body’s feelings. Ideally a posture should not bring pain. Pain is feedback – if you ignore it or try to push past it, you will eventually hurt yourself. Doing yoga with habitual discomfort colors your attitude toward yoga, making you more reluctant to do it. It also turns yoga into a chore, instead of the joy it could be.

Lines of Energy

In addition to breath and playing your edges, there is a third dimension to physical yoga. This dimension involves channeling energy to different parts of the body by creating what I call “lines of energy.” These lines of energy are vibratory currents that move in different directions within each posture. Descriptions of internal states are approximations at best. Even the word “energy,” when it is used to signify an inward level of activation, may seem vague. Yet we are aware of having more or less energy. If you pay attention, you may notice that some parts of the body seem alive and vital, while others feel dead



A variation on the handstand.

and blocked. You may also notice subtle currents moving in the body. This should not be surprising since the body has a hydraulic (circulatory) and an electrical (nervous) system.

Most of the stretching done in postures primarily involves muscles and tendons. But there is another kind of stretching that I call “stretching in the nerves.” Here you use the muscles to stretch the nerves, creating an energy flow, instead of to gain extension in the posture. The focus is on creating an internal current in the nerves that can be felt and intensified. The intensity of this current in the nerves can be controlled by the muscles and has a vibratory feeling, usually moving in an outward direction. For example, you can create an internal line of energy by holding your arm parallel to the floor and stretching it outward. This brings a vibration that moves from the shoulder out the arm, through the fingers. Each posture has its own lines of energy which can be created at different stages in the posture, and which complement one another and work together to involve the body as a whole.

These lines of energy affect your yoga in several ways by: 1) increasing energy within the posture, 2) toning and relaxing the nervous system, 3) decreasing the likelihood of injury through over extension of muscular stretch, 4) increasing strength and endurance in postures, and 5) internally aligning the body in the pose.

Concern for proper alignment in a posture is important; however, many people exclusively use external methods to get aligned – such as having another person, who hopefully knows alignment, adjust their body, or trying to approximate a picture or ideal of a completed pose. External methods are useful at times, but I feel it is only when alignment is done internally, by the body’s own intelligence, that a posture is truly “understood.”

In the Triangle pose, the arrows in figure one mark the direction of five lines of energy. Strengthening the flow of the current along each of the lines automatically aligns the body from the inside. When the posture is properly aligned, the currents of energy flow more freely. *This can be felt.* These lines of energy break through blocks in the body without “forcing” the posture and ultimately give greater extension.



If in the Triangle, you emphasize the line from shoulder through the raised arm to the finger tips, it opens the chest and aligns the pelvis. The back leg line moves from the hip down the leg into the outside of the foot, raising the arch. This line also aligns the pelvis and frees the hip. The front leg line moves from the buttock down the leg to the foot, aligning the front knee in a plane with the pelvis. The line moving up the spine

outward elongates the spine, giving it room to move. This also unlocks the hip and works in opposition to the back leg line. The fifth line, from the shoulder down to the fingertips of the lower arm, helps keep the shoulders in the same plane as the pelvis, and also helps move the posture to greater depth.

These lines are actually moving the energy in five directions and creating different oppositions of musculature. Using muscle sets in opposition can allow you to separate different parts of the body (and in other postures, even vertebrae of the spine) from each other, creating control, extension, energy and release. It is learning to create and channel lines of energy that makes this possible.



In figure 2 the extension is much less than figure 1. Assume this is the place of first resistance – the first edge. By deepening your breath and consciously increasing the five lines in the posture, you are doing what I call “stretching within the pose” or “nerve-stretching,” instead of muscle-stretching, which is reaching for greater extension. This aligns the body throughout the pose, helping you let go of initial resistance, and allows the body to draw you in more deeply.

Levers

There are three basic kinds of “levers” or forces that help move the muscles: 1) external levers (floor, wall, and other objects), 2) body-on-body levers (where one part of the body moves another), and 3) internal levers (where the muscles learn to lever themselves without external aid).

External levers are the easiest to use and internal levers are the hardest to learn. But it is important whenever possible to use internal levers, since they teach you how to move yourself from the inside. This builds sensitivity in the tissue and also gives the kind of control necessary to deepen your yoga. It is easiest to injure yourself using external levers because you are applying force to the body from the outside. Body-on-body levers also exert force from the outside, but allow more sensitivity to feedback. It is hard to injure yourself using internal levers because it’s difficult for the body to push itself beyond its limits from the inside. All internal levers depend on lines of energy to work properly. (However, not all lines of energy are internal levers.) Learning how to use these levers opens yet another dimension in yoga.

Understanding the Posture

I have found that a more important framework than mentally aiming to “get” the final pose, is “understanding how the posture works.” When attention and focus, edge-playing, levers, and lines of energy interweave so that these seemingly disparate elements become one, then you understand how the

posture works. Understanding a posture is not just knowing with your mind how to place the body. The understanding comes when the muscles and nerves, and even the cells themselves, “know” how to work the posture.

There are many different ways of using breath, edges, lines of energy, alignment and levers in combination and separately. For example, you can focus on deepening and lengthening breath at the first edge; when breathing becomes regular, change your focus to creating one line of energy.

As soon as the body holds this in a relaxed way, you can add a second line of energy. You could also let go of one energy line and turn your attention to a different line. Another technically more difficult way of approaching the same posture is slowly to create and intensify all the lines of energy at once, using breath to control the intensity. Lines of energy bring what I call a dynamic relaxation to the muscles, for although the nerves are generating a current of energy, the muscles let go and eventually move to greater extension. When you understand how the posture works and follow where the energy of the body leads you, often you find that what you think is a completed pose has further extensions and possible variations.

Psychological Aspects

Resistance

Transformation, change, growth, actualizing potential – these are very positive sounding ideals that most people who do yoga strive for. Yet all of us who are involved in any growth process face resistance. In yoga there is resistance in the tissue, resistance to doing yoga, resistance to changing the habits and lifestyles that impede growth. As a person who has been involved with yoga and growth-oriented activities for years, it seemingly would be nice if I could tell you that I have conquered resistance. I have not. I do not feel that it can be totally conquered, although it need not be a significant problem either. You can learn to use it as a teacher, for resistance can teach you where your habits and attachments lie. It can also teach you where you block yourself and where you are self-protective. In order to go into this, I would like to discuss more of the psychological aspects of yoga.

That the mind and body affect each other is obvious. Psychological tensions live in the musculature: when you are “up tight,” you are literally tightening the muscles and blocking energy. Through years of accumulated tensions, the body becomes a repository for the unconscious, in that it “learns” to close off different physical areas that affect emotional states. For instance, a compressed chest literally makes it harder to experience deep emotions. The strength of the emotions that may come from opening your chest can make you uncomfortable, so you may resist opening that area.

So much of what limits our yoga practice is not in the body itself, but rather mental attitudes and habits. Resistance in pos

tures is in the mind as well as in the body. Mental resistance can take many forms – forgetting, excuses, so-called “laziness,” even illness and injuries. If you can minimize mental resistance, that is the key to eventually working through the physical resistance. As you get deeper into Hatha (physical) Yoga, it becomes increasingly necessary to get to know the nature of the mind.

Most of us totally identify with our mind, calling it ourselves. Without realizing it is just one of the systems that makes up a human being. The importance of the mind is enormous, and its power so great, that it often ignores, subverts, or overrides the other systems that have their own intelligence. Our body may tell us we’re not hungry, yet we eat; or when tired, we push ourselves. Though yoga can make us more attuned to the wisdom within the tissue, it is the mind that must interpret this. How the mind interprets is directly related to its nature and its experience (conditioning). We don’t usually think of the mind as structured and conditioned, because our mind is like a lens that we view ourselves and the world through – a given, that we rarely question. Yet there are principles to how the mind works, just like there are principles to how the body works. Understanding them opens up the mind and body to hitherto unimagined possibilities, and is a doorway to transformation.

Looking at resistance can reveal the nature of mind, for what we are resisting is often the very thing we say we want. Why do I do yoga at all? How much of my yoga is fueled by fear – of aging, of dying, of losing energy? How much of my yoga is driven by ambition – for accomplishment, for higher states of consciousness, for youth and health, for vibrancy? Of course, we all have fears and ambitions that we bring to yoga. The problem is not that we have them, but rather that they take over our yoga, often unconsciously. When this happens, the mind is oriented either to the past or the future, and loses contact with the living process of yoga: how the muscles feel, the energy being generated, the subtle changes which require great attention. If you become aware of how the motives that underly fear and ambition can limit your practice, this does not necessarily eliminate them or your other reasons for doing yoga. It can, however, help you put them aside during your practice, so that you can be less mechanical and more present and attentive.

Habits

Have you ever asked yourself why you do things that you know aren’t good for you? Not, “how do I stop?” but, “why do I do them at all?” Another way of asking is, “What is the nature of self-destructiveness?” Most of us think we would like to have more energy, but if we look carefully and honestly, we see that we keep our energy controlled within safe boundaries. If our energy gets too low, the

fabric of our life falls apart. We need a certain amount of energy to keep it together. Less obviously, if your energy gets too high, it can push you out of your habits and the security and pleasures they are linked to. Many activities take a certain energy level – some high, others low. For example, you can’t watch television if your energy is too high, for you become restless. If, for whatever reason, you are attached to TV, you may overeat to bring your energy down. Here you are unconsciously controlling your energy with overeating, which is self-destructive, in order to preserve a pleasure. Doing yoga properly increases energy, which pushes against mental and physical habits, while the habits, by their nature, resist change.

“Bad habits” can be looked upon as a way of resisting change by hooking you to immediate gratification, which is a powerful source of conditioning. The taste of food, for example, can give immediate pleasure. The power of taste makes it difficult not to let it rule you, which puts you out of touch with using food for energy and nourishment. The feeling of being out of control, unable to resist temptation, is usually a sign of physical or psychological addiction, and has mechanical aspects that keep you on automatic. Though you “know” the pleasure is not worth the pain it will cause, it is still often surprisingly difficult to resist it. Self-destructiveness involves, among other things, going for an immediate pleasure, even though the end result is pain. Part of the resistance to doing yoga stems from a deep reluctance to let go of the pleasures within the addictions. Doing yoga awarely can unhook you from those habits and addictions.

When you recognize what an important role mind plays in yoga, you can see why exploring the mind is essential. As conditioning in the body narrows the body’s movements, so do habits in the mind tend to make you more “narrow-minded.” A narrow mind involves more than just being attached to a particular set of beliefs. It narrows the whole field of perception and also cuts off emotional responsiveness and empathy. Rigidity in the mind constricts mental movement and consequently limits the field of what is possible for you



Photo by: Jackie Stein

in life. The beliefs, values, headsets, and even the wants that live in thought create self-images that determine what you think, imagine, and therefore what you do. In physical yoga, the process of confronting and nudging the body's limits, blocks, and conditionings opens and transforms you. So, too, as you get to know your mind, how it works and where your psychological limits are, the process opens the mind and literally expands consciousness.

How much do memory, expectation, and immediate gratification affect the way you do yoga? What thoughts come up during your yoga practice? Are there postures you look forward to doing, while you avoid others? Do you hurry the ones you don't like to get them over with? Does your mind wander? Do you contemplate what posture to do next, how long you have left to go, or what you're going to do after yoga? These types of thoughts may cross your mind while doing yoga. Naturally, they greatly influence how you do the pose and the quality of energy generated.

Most of us involved in yoga tell ourselves we want to grow. If we look honestly at this, what we generally mean by "growth" is keeping everything about ourselves and our lives that we like, getting rid of what we don't like, and getting more of what we think we're going to like. Real growth and transformation move you not only from things you don't like, but also from pleasures and habits you're attached to. You cannot be certain how you would be if you were different or in what direction growth will take you. Real growth has aspects of unpredictability in it that can not only alter your habits, but even the very likes and dislikes, or preferences, that underlie them.

People often ask this kind of question: "To do yoga, will I have to give up wine and steak?" It's important to understand that the fear of giving up or losing certain pleasures (whatever they may be) can bring the reaction of holding on more tightly, which limits your yoga and growth. There are so many pleasures and habits that define your life – your very personality. The old, by its nature, has a comfort. Even your problems and "hang ups" are a form of security against change. Some habits and pleasures are appropriate only during certain periods of life. Others can remain fitting, if modified, while still others might meaningfully stay with you over your lifespan. Whether what you are doing is in fact "right" for your life is a basic question that cannot be answered through formulas. One of the real gifts yoga gives you is more sensitivity to life, which moves you toward what is appropriate for you.

In the process of yoga, habits and ways of being can leave or modify on their own. This is not to say there is no resistance to letting go of old pleasures, or that you do not have to use intelligence to free yourself from aspects of your life that are no longer appropriate. Rather, the energy of yoga, and

the awareness it brings, make more obvious what is and is not conducive to your well-being. The day-to-day practice of yoga gives you messages that are very difficult to ignore.

There is an edge that each of us must confront between growing, which is an adventure, and holding on to security. Some security is necessary as a base to move from, while too much dampens growth and dulls life by keeping newness out. One of the remarkable things about yoga is that it generates energy that opens you, while building both the physical and psychological strength to assimilate change into your life. This gives an entirely different kind of security – the security of knowing that you can respond to whatever challenges life may bring.

Competition & Comparison

Have you ever noticed how much of your day-to-day life you spend thinking? Thought can be very mechanical and repetitive. In different situations you have certain thought patterns which are so much like tapes that I call them "mental cassettes." They serve many purposes. For example, some mental tapes reduce tension, others channel anger to hurt or hurt to anger (depending on which you're used to and more comfortable with). Many of these tapes also evaluate and judge. How much of your life do you spend feeling either "better than" or "worse than?" What thoughts bring these feelings? We use our minds to control how we feel as best we can. Often controlling how we feel gives immediate relief or gratification, but causes more severe long-term problems. For example, if I am envious of you and also think envy is bad, or a sign of how unevolved I am, I suppress it with thought. I talk myself out of feeling it consciously, or pretend I don't feel it at all, and hide it from myself by burying it deep within the body's tissues. This is the stuff of tension.

Yoga is usually presented as being noncompetitive. At its heart, this is true, but that doesn't mean yoga is free from competition at all times. As you get more deeply into yoga, the competitive aspect of mind must be looked at, for if you don't explore it, competition can occur automatically, and take you over unawares. Either you channel yourself toward accomplishment, ultimately resulting in injuries, or you try to suppress competitiveness, which closes you to the learning that can only come through comparison. If you subscribe to a value system that judges competition to be bad, it makes it harder to see it should it arise in you. This impedes self-knowledge, and closes and tightens you.

If you look very carefully at competition, you will find that its roots lie in comparison, which is a basic mode of thought. The very notion of "progress" implies comparison. You may say that you can be competitive with yourself without comparing yourself to others. This is partially true, but it is impor-

tant to see that being competitive with yourself has aspects of competitiveness with others in it. Standards of excellence or progress do not exist in a vacuum, but arise in the context of what other people are doing.

The mind that compares is a useful and necessary tool, for day-to-day comparison is a basis for feedback. Doing yoga daily is a very direct way of tuning in on how you have been treating yourself on the previous day, as well as seeing long-range trends. Diet, emotions, conflict, stress, and relationships affect you and your yoga. These aspects of life can be used as feedback that can help you learn how things affect each other. Reading feedback of this sort is based on comparison.

Wanting to progress has a self-competitive aspect – wanting to be as good as or better than yesterday, or last year. Also, comparing yourself with others, whether you like it or not, is inevitable. Comparison, and its extension competition, cannot be eliminated through effort, no matter how much you might want to. Trying to be non-competitive is competing with yourself or others on how non-competitive you are. If you think you are succeeding, (and the mind can convince itself of anything), this can feed feelings of superiority, which is competition. The meditative state of mind that is essential for the necessary attention in yoga transcends competition, not by fighting it, but rather by seeing its place as feedback, and also seeing its limits and dangers.

Comparison is an integral part of perceiving change, but I can subtly begin to compete – with myself or others – in how much or how fast I am changing and transforming. In this way, even the idea of transformation can become yet another goal to be achieved. Transformation is an endless process to

be lived, that cannot be captured or possessed – you can only participate in it.

Evolution

Yoga, at its core, is looking within to understand the timeless question, “Who am I?” As you delve into the deep regions of your being, the knowledge that comes is not merely about you, the individual, but includes the understanding of yourself as part of the total fabric of life. When the parts of the whole open up to each other, breaking the boundaries of separateness, real communication, which is communion, occurs.

Movement is at the core of energy, relationship, growth – it is at the heart of life itself. Evolution is the way movement expresses itself throughout the universe. Evolution can be looked upon as the movement of forms toward greater complexity and adaptability. This is, however, only the external form, the skin, of evolution, which makes possible the most basic movement: the evolution of awareness. Maturation and evolution come when the spectrum of awareness broadens, becoming more inclusive.

Yoga brings opening and movement deep within the very fiber of your being, and expands consciousness, enlarging your capacity for depth of communication. This self-transformation opens you to a more profound relationship with life, and also to an aware participation in the evolutionary process. In the last analysis, these two things are one. ★

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