

Practising Yoga

Yoga, according to Patanjali, the greatest commentator on the subject, is ultimately about *kaivalyam* - freedom or independence. From what? From the *klesa* - our fears, our identifications that cause us so much suffering, our desperate longing for things or unreasonable dislikes which make us take the wrong path, from not seeing how things really are. But these are all rooted very very deeply within us, and cannot easily be overcome. We have to be continually vigilant, so that we get to understand ourselves better, and to accept ourselves with kindness, whilst being clear about the need for change.

Yoga is also about living as fulfilled a life as possible, given the circumstances around us. For this, we need to keep ourselves as healthy as possible, physically and mentally (of the two, the latter is by far the more important). What do we mean by mental health? Fostering the qualities of stability, of positivity, of seeing things as they really are, neither through rose tinted nor through dark glasses.

For both these goals - independence and health - practice is vital. This is because we are creatures of pattern - we are made up of *samskara-s*, patterns and habits: this is not a Bad Thing, it just is. Patanjali teaches that we can never get rid of old habits....but we CAN build new, healthier ones which in time become stronger than the old. My mother resumed smoking cigarettes after my father's sudden death, after not smoking for fifteen to twenty years - but she was able to stop again after only four weeks: the new habit of not smoking reasserted itself and was ultimately stronger than the old. So how do we build new habits? Through repetition. This is why practice is so important, whether the habits we want to change are to do with our body or our breathing or our mind or our attitudes or our emotions, and why it really needs to be done every day.

Abhyasa, practice, is the very first thing that Patanjali discusses when he starts to tell us how to achieve the state of yoga in the Yoga Sutra [YS 1.12]. But he doesn't talk about it in isolation: it goes with *vairagyam*, being able to detach from things - they are often called the two wings of a bird: both are necessary. Letting go of old patterns is crucial, to make space for the new. It is worth remembering that, in the eyes of yoga, we are all essentially perfect: we just have to get rid of the dust and dirt that

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obscures our light so that it can shine. Krishnamacharya said that *abhyasa* will give you the strength for *vairagya*, and *vairagya* will test your *abhyasa*.

The roots of the word *abhyasa* show a link with the earth: just as the earth is the foundation for all life, nourishing it and manifesting it, so is practice the foundation and nourishment for our development, whether we are talking at the physical or mental or spiritual level, and it is very often in our practice that new things manifest.

In YS 1.13 Patanjali says that practice is not only reaching the state of yoga, (*nirodhah*, when the mind's activities are focused and contained), but being able to stay steadily, *sthitau*, in that state. He also talks about the need for effort, *yatna*. Krishnamacharya, commenting on this, said that the effort must always be appropriate to the individual and his or her circumstances; that it should come from the heart; that linking with the breath will help because the breath is the expression of consciousness within us; and that there should be a quality of lightness to it. What does this mean? There should be no fear, no heavy feeling that 'I have to do this' but rather an enthusiasm and joy when we approach our practice.

Patanjali says more in the next sutra - that practice will be well established when it is endowed with (*asevito*) certain qualities. It must be longterm, *dirghakala*; it should feel as though there are no obstacles, *nairantarya*. (Of course there will be problems, but they don't have to be seen as obstacles). It should be *sat kara*. *Sat* means what is real and true, so our practice should be done (*kara*) consistent with our own reality and truth. We might have done all sorts of wonderful *asana* in our youth, whilst in middle age, pressed for time with commitments to work and family, our practice may have evolved into a few *asana*, and more emphasis on *pranayama*, the best tool for sharpening the mind. Two or three decades on it is still important to keep our body as mobile and strong as possible, and our mind clear, but we may be more interested (and have the patience for) meditation. *Sat* can also represent *sattva*, and so there must also be a quality, again, of lightness and positivity. Krishnamacharya thought that this also meant that our practice should be imbued with a quality of devotion. The last quality listed is *adara* - this can be translated in many ways: we should be open to new experiences, without expectation; we should be careful and respectful in our approach; we should be enthusiastic and confident, trusting in what we are doing.

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Patanjali advises on how we should practise - what qualities we should bring to it. He doesn't tell us what to practise, other than that it should be appropriate for our own reality. So what should it consist of? It is good to have some time 'on the mat' each day, and this is what is generally meant when we talk about our yoga practice. It can be work with the body, with the breath, with the mind, with the voice. Traditionally your practice would be given to you by your teacher, who, it was felt, could see you and your needs more clearly than you could yourself. This is how students are still trained in the tradition of Krishnamacharya. A word of warning: it is SO easy to start off all enthusiastic, but it is much more difficult to sustain that enthusiasm. So don't be angry with yourself when this happens, for it happens to almost everyone. Just continue and remember to keep trying to experience it as though for the first time...as it indeed is, the first time that you have ever done it in this present moment.

Awareness of the breath can be particularly helpful at these times at keeping us in the present. I also think it is useful at the end of our practice to note how good it makes us feel and to experience it as intensely as possible, even if only for half a minute, so that we are more motivated to continue the next day, and the next, and the next week and month.

But our practice also includes what we do and how we do it 'off the mat' - trying to see things clearly; following the *yama-s* and *niyama-s* and other yoga teachings, keeping our goals in mind and allowing them to infuse our everyday life and decisions. There is so much wonderful advice in the Yoga Sutra to help us on our path.