



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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What Is Yoga? Part 5

This is a continuation of the series "What is Yoga" in which I am explaining what the practice of yoga means to different people and what you can expect to get out of your yoga practice.

As practitioners of yoga, we try to find peace through the mind-body connection. The quality of our time on the yoga mat is far more important than the quantity of time on the mat. If we allow our ego to lead our practice, we run the risk of putting too much effort into our asana practice, which can create agitation in the mind and injury in the body. If we practice with curiosity and compassion for ourselves, then our bodies, breathing and minds are more likely to become calm and peaceful.

Sometimes we feel bored with our yoga practice and find excuses not to practice. We may also feel we are not making any progress and even feeling less competent than before. We find a hundred reasons not to practice our yoga. These are mental obstacles and when our mind is no longer with us in an asana, practice becomes a chore. This is when we need to take on board the eight limbs of yoga and dig a little deeper into our practice. An attitude adjustment is required to sustain growth and development.

Eight Limbs of Yoga

Now we continue with the fifth limb. So far we have learnt about Yama, Niyama, Asana and Pranayama. The fifth limb or step is Pratyahara.

Pratyahara

This is defined as "the conscious withdrawal of energy from the senses." Almost without exception yoga students are puzzled by this limb. We seem to understand the basic ethical teachings like truthfulness and the basic physical teachings like asana and pranayama. But for most of us the practice of pratyahara remains elusive.

One way to begin to understand pratyahara is to focus on a familiar yoga posture, Savasana. This posture is done lying supine on the floor and is the practice of relaxing deeply. The first stage of Savasana involves physiological relaxation. In this stage, as you become comfortable, there is first an awareness of the muscles gradually relaxing, then of the breath slowing, and finally of the body completely letting go. While delicious, this first stage is only the beginning of the practice.

In the second stage of Savasana you are withdrawing from the external world without completely losing contact with it. This withdrawal is the experience of pratyahara. Most of us know this state; when you're in it, you feel like you're at the bottom of a well. You register the sounds that occur around you, for example, but these sounds do not create disturbance in your body or mind. It is this state of nonreaction that can be called pratyahara. You still register input from your sense organs, but you don't react to that input.

The goal of pratyahara is not to tune everything out, but instead to find the source of stillness and calm that resides within you, even in the midst of chaos.

Posture of the Month – Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana

Parivrtta means turned around, revolved. Janu means the knee and sirsa the head. In this variation of Janu Sirsasana one leg is extended on the ground, the other is bent at the knee, the trunk is twisted around, the extended foot is caught with both hands and the back of the head is placed on the knee of the extended leg by bending the spine back.

Technique

1. Sit on the floor with your legs stretched straight in front.
2. Bend your left knee and move it to the left and place your left heel against the inner side of your left thigh as high as possible. The angle between your two legs should be obtuse so extend your left knee as far back as possible.
3. Turn your body to the left.
4. Stretch your right arm along your right leg towards your right foot. You may need to hold a belt around your right foot if you are not yet ready to hold the foot.
5. Turn your right forearm and wrist clockwise so that your right thumb points to the floor and your right little finger points up. Then, with your right hand hold the inner side of your right foot. Your right elbow is now on the inside of your right leg.
6. If you are holding a belt you still turn your right forearm and wrist clockwise and drop your elbow on the inside of your right leg.
7. Place your left hand on your left hip and roll your left shoulder back so opening up the front of your body.
8. Inhale and stretch your left arm straight up toward the ceiling, lean it back slightly, and then, with another inhale, stretch it over your left ear and take hold of the outside edge of your right foot. Turn your head to look at the ceiling. Bend and widen your elbows, move your head in between your arms and rest the back of your head on your right knee.
9. If you are not ready to hold your right foot with your left hand it is better to keep your left hand on your hip and work on opening and twisting the upper body.
10. Hold this posture for about 20 seconds. Your breathing will be short and fast due to the contraction of the abdomen.
11. To come out, first untwist your torso, release your hands and then inhale and lift to an upright position.
12. Repeat these steps on the other side for the same length of time.

Preparatory Postures

Parighasana, Supta Padangusthasana, Adho Mukha Svanasana, Parsvakonasana, Vrksasana and Janu Sirsasana.

Benefits of this posture

- Stretches the spine, shoulders, and hamstrings
- Stimulates blood circulation to the spine
- Relieves backache
- Tones the liver
- Tones and activates the kidneys

- Improves digestion



Contact Lynne at lynne.gully@iremia.net or Tel +302892042356