



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

Issue no: 26

June 2009

What Is Yoga? Part 6

This is the final newsletter in 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. I hope you have found it interesting to find out that yoga is so much more than practicing postures.

Eight Limbs of Yoga

So far we have learnt about Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama and Pratyahara. The final three limbs are Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi –the integration of the body, breath, mind, intellect and self.

Dharana

As each stage prepares us for the next, the practice of pratyahara creates the setting for *dharana*, or concentration. Having relieved ourselves of outside distractions, we can now deal with the distractions of the mind itself. No easy task! In the practice of concentration, which precedes meditation, we learn how to slow down the thinking process by concentrating on a single mental object or the silent repetition of a sound. We, of course, have already begun to develop our powers of concentration in the previous three stages of posture, breath control, and withdrawal of the senses. In asana and pranayama, although we pay attention to our actions, our attention travels. Our focus constantly shifts as we fine-tune the many nuances of any particular posture or breathing technique. In pratyahara we become self-observant; now, in dharana, we focus our attention on a single point. Extended periods of concentration naturally lead to meditation.

Dhyana

Meditation or contemplation, the seventh limb, is the uninterrupted flow of concentration. Although concentration (dharana) and meditation (dhyana) may appear to be one and the same, a fine line of distinction exists between these two stages. Where dharana practices one-pointed attention, dhyana is ultimately a state of being keenly aware without focus. At this stage, the mind has been quieted, and in the stillness it produces few or no thoughts at all. The strength and stamina it takes to reach this state of stillness is quite impressive. But don't give up. While this may seem a difficult if not impossible task, remember that yoga is a process. Even though we may not attain the "picture perfect" pose, or the ideal state of consciousness, we benefit at every stage of our progress.

Samadhi

This eighth and final limb is often described as a state of ecstasy. At this stage, the meditator merges with his or her point of focus. The meditator comes to realise a profound connection with all living things. With this realization comes the experience of bliss and being at one with the Universe. If we think about it, deep down, all human beings want peace. We also might give some thought to the fact that this ultimate stage of yoga—enlightenment—can neither be bought nor possessed. Though Samadhi can be explained at the intellectual level, it can only be experienced at the level of the heart.

Posture of the Month

Parivrtta Parsvakonasana

Parivrtta means revolved, turned round or back. Parsva means side or flank. Kona is an angle. This is the revolving lateral angle posture.

Technique

1. Stand in Tadasana.
2. On an exhalation, step or lightly jump your feet wide apart. Stretch your arms sideways in line with your shoulders. Turn your left foot in and your right foot out. Firm your thighs and keep your left leg stretched out and tightened at the knee.
3. Exhale and bend your right knee. If possible, bring your right thigh parallel to the floor. Keep your left leg active by pulling up the quadriceps muscle and extending strongly through your left heel.
4. With another exhale rotate to the right and place your left arm over your right knee. Rest your left armpit on the outer side of your right knee. Place your left palm on the floor by the outer side of your right foot. If you can't reach the floor, support your hand on a block.
5. Place your right hand on your hip and give a good twist to your spine to the right.
6. Stretch your right arm over the back of your right ear with the palm facing down. Then turn your head to look at your right arm.
7. As in all twists lengthen and soften the belly, extend your spine with each inhalation, and increase the twist as you exhale.
8. Stay in this posture for 30 seconds to 1 minute breathing deeply and evenly. Inhale to come up, exhale to release the twist.
9. Reverse your feet and repeat for the same length of time to the left. Then return to Tadasana.

Preparatory Postures

Most of the standing postures are appropriate preparations for this challenging standing twist, especially Parivrtta Trikonasana. Other postures that help are Baddha Konasana, Upavista Konasana, Virasana and Gomukhasana.

Cautions

If you have any neck problems, don't turn your head to look at the top arm; instead look straight ahead with the sides of the neck lengthened evenly, or look down at the floor.

Beginner's Tip

Beginners often have difficulty maintaining their balance in this posture. To improve your balance, support your heel either by standing it on a block, or by bracing it against a wall.

Benefits of this posture

- Strengthens and stretches the legs, knees, and ankles
- Stretches the groins, spine, chest and lungs, and shoulders
- Circulates blood around the abdominal organs and the spinal column and helps rejuvenation
- Increases stamina
- Improves digestion and aids elimination
- Improves balance



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