

## In search of embodiment

For many modern practitioners posture practice (asana) is yoga in its entirety. While this is far from true, what is certain is that the practice of asana has become the main point of entry into the wider yoga tradition. As such it has become the place where the traditions of yoga have been subject to the greatest modification, merger, evolution and corruption over the past century.

In many places modern asana practice has become little more than an exercise class that emphasises flexibility. Although there are growing concerns about the injury potential of ill-informed asana practice, many people benefit from yoga as an exercise form.

Perhaps the most dramatic examples are among those that are drawn to yoga as a therapeutic process aimed at relieving back pain, arthritis, injuries, stress related symptoms and many other conditions. This 'therapeutic' group is essentially seeking to obtain or recover normal movement potential. There is an increasing body of scientific evidence and evaluation of yoga practices employed in this way. William Broad's book 'The Science of Yoga' provides an excellent introduction to this area.

In addition, there are many practitioners that seek improved strength and flexibility through regular asana practice. This is a diverse group of people using yoga asana as an exercise form to help them stay fit and healthy. Individual motivations and standards of fitness vary across a broad spectrum. There are the 'third age' classes aimed at helping elders stay mobile and agile enough to maintain a 'normal' range of activities and reduce the risk of falls etc. At the other end of the spectrum is the advanced asana practitioner, with leg behind head and the strength and grace of a gymnast.

However, even practitioners motivated solely by physical health or therapeutic goals, often encounter something in asana practice that distinguishes it from other health and fitness activities.

For most of us, our first contact with yoga asana practice, involves a number of key areas of 'newness'. It begins typically with an experience of slowing down, of paying attention. These two things are closely related and are highly characteristic of yoga asana. Consider the difference between running on a treadmill in a gym, where we may occupy our minds with music, reflections on the day ahead or even by watching television. We leave our bodies to get on with running while our minds occupy themselves with something else. Most yoga asana classes, by contrast, ask us to pay attention to unfamiliar instructions and sensations.

This chapter will explore a number of ideas relevant to yoga asana practice. These ideas apply to all styles and all levels of physical yoga. They are a useful resource whether your practice is primarily therapeutic, health and fitness focused or encompasses yoga in its broader sense. They increase the likelihood of beneficial outcomes and reduce the risk of injury or ineffectual practice.

The topics covered are organised under the following headings:

- Asana as a process of learning and change
- Functional anatomy
- Whole body awakening
- Right effort
- Dancing in gravity
- Deep space explorations
- Limits and how to relate to them
- The power of intention and reflection
- The fruits of embodiment

Let's begin with some definitions :

**Asana** is the name for the postures and poses practiced in most yoga classes.

**Pranayama** is the term used to describe a wide range of breath awareness and control techniques, sometimes used in conjunction with asana but often as separate practices.

**Embodiment** is a term used here to describe a state of heightened awareness of physical sensation, body position and engagement. The more embodied a person is, the closer to optimum their movements and posture will be, within the constraints applied by their system. The greater their sense of physical ease in all circumstances. Embodiment is defined, not by physical characteristics or athletic prowess, but by the degree of sensory awareness present.

### Asana as a process of learning and change

Human beings are probably the most adept learners in nature. We are helpless at birth and the majority of our adult capabilities are learnt in some way.

In the context of yoga asana, three methods of learning in particular are employed.

- We imitate as best we can fellow students and/or our teachers
- We recruit familiar movements or positions in an attempt to make the shape of the new posture

- We consciously attempt to innovate new body patterns based on our teacher's instruction or by 'figuring it out' for ourselves, often by trial and error.

All three methods can be useful and effective in different circumstances. However, for many of us, imitation and recruitment can be limiting, or even problematic, in the world of yoga asana.

Imitation may give us a rough indication of where our body parts should be in a particular pose. But it gives us little sense of what a posture feels like or what needs to happen in our own bodies for us to mirror the shape we see in someone else's. It may even encourage us to attempt to adopt a 'shape', even though our own system is unable to do so. We ignore pain messages and 'make the shape' regardless. Injury is a frequent consequence.

Recruitment too can be limiting when applied to asana practice. This is, partly at least, because by the time we are adults we tend to be fairly well established in our body use patterns. Most modern yoga practitioners begin in adulthood. Consequently, we try to do asana based on our experience in sports, physical work or other day to day activities. In other words, using our normal range of movements and our favoured patterns of effort.

This occasionally works but often does not, as the asana is requiring an unfamiliar movement. If we are not helped to recognise this by our teacher, asana practice can lead to exaggerating patterns in the body that were partly or fully formed when we walked in the door of the yoga studio. For the rare adults with excellent range and fluidity of movement this may not be an issue. However, for most people this has the potential to aggravate existing injuries or worsen postural imbalance.

Hopefully, this is not the typical result of asana practice. But in understanding why and how we practice asana it is useful to explore why not. The key to change seems to be the teacher's ability to communicate, and the students' willingness to explore asana as a different way of moving and being in the body.

This is perhaps obvious to those who have been practicing asana for a while. It may not be at all obvious to the new student. And even long term practitioners may have their 'blind spots' where habitual and sub-optimal patterns of posture and movement continue to play out.

Imagine I am a new student with a somewhat worn medial meniscus in my left knee. It has been caused by postural patterns in my pelvis and feet, compounded by years of running to keep fit. I start yoga because running has begun to make my knee sore and a friend has told me that yoga might help.

In my first class we begin to look at seated hip openers. My hips and ankles are really stiff from my years of running, so when I try to imitate my teacher sitting easily in crossed leg position, my legs stay at about forty five degrees at best. My hips and ankle are screaming, but surely I can do this simple movement. I've run marathons for goodness sake! I use my hands to push down on my knee trying to replicate the half lotus shape my teacher is now demonstrating. Hip and ankle are locked so the only way to get more movement is by twisting the knee. What do you know? This puts more strain through the padding of the inner knee known as the medial meniscus. After three months of this approach, what began as a minor tear in the cartilage has deepened to the point where the knee locks painfully when I'm walking. My doctor tells me I need surgery.

"And stay away from yoga" he orders me. "That's what caused this."

In a way he's right. But it might be more accurate to say that it is the way that I have engaged with yoga asana that has caused the problem to develop in this way.

If I'm lucky however, things never get to this stage. The first time my teacher sees me pushing on my knee, she stops me. She explains that any further movement has to come from my hip and that pushing on the knee may well lead to injury (even in someone without pre-existing cartilage damage).

She encourages me to be patient. She shows me ways to feel into the hip and let go some of the muscle tension that is holding the joint rigid. I work gently with her suggestions and gradually the hip mobility increases, and the knee begins to its steady (and comfortable) journey towards the ground.

I came to the yoga class with a pre-existing idea of how to 'use my body'. I wanted to get more flexible and/or stronger. I was ready to employ my default 'no pain, no gain' strategy and work hard to improve.

What my teacher has done is taught me about body awareness and the cultivation of ease. This is almost the polar opposite of the strategy I brought with me. I am encouraged to find a new approach, one that requires me to become embodied through sensory awareness. At its best this is a body centred exploration of the questions 'what's going on?' and 'why this way?'.

Other students may start with different patterns and challenges, but the same principles apply. Take, for example, the hypermobile student, who seems like the natural yogi because she can 'do' so many of the postures straight away. If she does not learn how to stabilise her joints she runs the risk of injury and long term joint or ligament damage in asana practice, particularly if she progresses to advanced postures. She too, would be best served by finding greater sensory awareness, greater embodiment.

This points to the key difference between yoga asana and many other physical activities. People do get more flexible and stronger doing yoga asana. But, with luck, this is a secondary effect of an increasing ability to track sensation in the body, optimise muscular engagement and cultivate ease. In short, to becoming more embodied.

The remainder of this chapter includes a number of further ideas that are helpful in approaching asana practice as a pathway to embodiment rather than just another exercise regime. They are not instructions so much as an introduction to different ways of exploring posture and movement. A good teacher will blend these ideas in her instructions, adjustments and modifications. A good student will realise that curiosity, awareness and beginner's mind (ie a willingness to start from scratch again and again and again!) are his most useful tools.

### Functional Anatomy

To a greater or lesser degree, most of us have been schooled to think about our bodies with reference to western anatomy. Bones, joints and muscles in particular, figure widely in the way we talk and think about asana practice. There are some real advantages to this approach particularly when communicating with our teachers or sharing our experience with others. It gives us a common language that is quite specific, at least in terms of location. However, the anatomical model, while useful for identifying and labelling different parts of the body, is less helpful when trying to describe, explain and experience how the body functions. This is particularly so at a 'whole body' level which is the scale at which we perform yoga postures.

Other ways of thinking about our structure may be useful in identifying and then loosening the grip of habitual posture and movement patterns that affect our asana practice.

Furthermore, the yogis of the middle ages, who originated a lot of the techniques of modern asana practice, did not describe the body in the same way that we do today. They developed what might be considered an anatomy of sensation and experience. The language of prana, nadis and chakras, bindu and granthis reflects an experience of the body as primarily an energetic, sensory entity. While a quite different model of anatomy to modern science, for many practitioners, it remains a valuable way of relating to our bodies especially in the context of asana. It can help encourage a focus on sensation and integration rather than division and analysis.

One of the biggest criticisms of the western medical model of the human body (at least from a functional perspective) is that it has largely come about through dissection of cadavers. To translate into less scientific but perhaps

more revealing terms – it's based on cutting up dead people with a selection of sharp instruments. While we've learnt a huge amount from this approach, we should perhaps recognise a couple of limitations when applying it to asana practice. Namely :

- something is different between an asana practitioner's body and the cadaver. To point out the obvious - one is alive and the other is not. Studies on patients under general anaesthetic have shown that even while unconscious the body functions radically differently – with much greater range of movement, for example - when compared with the person in a conscious state. It is perhaps not surprising that an alive, conscious body functions very differently to a dead one!
- a sharp instrument is required to separate and identify the different structures which we then refer to as if they were wholly independent objects. For example, the skin of the upper arm, biceps, triceps and humerus are a continuous mass of intertwined tissue that, until we get out our scalpel acts as a unified functional unit.

However, evidence is emerging that the connective tissues of the body, and in particular the fascia (the fibrous connective tissue that envelopes all other tissues in the body), may play a much greater role in internal communication and structural mobility than has previously been suspected.

Connective tissues in the body comprise – bones, cartilage, ligaments, tendons, as well as fascia, plus some specialised structures such as the cornea of the eye and the ground substance that makes up the extra-cellular matrix (the stuff that everything else floats in). Soft tissue is a term used to describe the connective tissue structures excluding the bones.

Research by Robert Schleip and others suggests that connective tissues act much more like a single structure, than separate elements connected by the 'telephone lines' of the nervous system. Added to this, evidence is growing from both formal research and the experience of body workers around the world, that the connective tissue structure of the body is incredibly plastic ie changeable throughout life.

To summarise, current scientific research is pointing towards:

- fascia acting as an organising structure shaping muscles and bones
- fascia and ground substance acting as a whole body communicating mechanism (alongside the nervous and endocrine systems though much faster than either)
- the soft tissue being a plastic and alterable structure that is affected by our thoughts, emotions and behaviours, as well as physical influences

- connective tissue in general, and fascia and ground substance in particular, may be the medium critical to understanding the physical body as energetic body. Further understanding may lead to bridging the gap between western science and the energetic language of anatomy used in yoga, Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine

What does this mean in practice? Well, if we try to feel or visualise our bones it is relatively easy to do so, especially if we have pictures or models to orient to. If our anatomy knowledge is good we may even be able to picture individual muscles contracting or lengthening. But the integrated fascial model asks us to relate to the soft tissue matrix as an interconnected unit. Trying to build a mental image or to develop an experiential sense of the muscles and fascia of our soft tissue is more challenging because it is so multi-layered.

### *The wetsuit analogy*

Imagine you are wearing a neoprene wetsuit. Visualise the way the suit stretches in all directions as you bend, twist, sit and stand. The highly flexible neoprene stretches in all directions to follow your movement.

This works pretty well as a simplistic model of an ideal musculo-fascial system – when one part moves, the whole moves. This allows for what is sometimes called ‘expansional balance’ where the whole system moves fluidly around a stable centre of gravity.

There are two limitations to the wetsuit analogy, however. Firstly, for most of us there are restrictions in the ‘elasticity’ of the wetsuit. Areas where the ‘stretch’ doesn’t transfer quite as it should. A tight back or shoulders, short hamstrings or hip flexors. Secondly, the wetsuit image gives an overly simplistic view of the musculo-fascial system as only one layer. We have three distinct layers in our skin alone. Between the outer layer of the skin and the innermost fascial covering of your thighbone, there may be literally dozens of layers. All of these layers have the potential to stretch and move independently or to become stiff and sticky in a way that limits movement potential.

### *The gripped shirt analogy*

Here, using an image of material which is less stretchy than neoprene we can see the impact of a restriction or a tightening in one part of the web and the lines of strain it introduces in other areas of the web. Imagine you are wearing a cotton shirt that in one place has been scrunched up and fixed firmly in place with a clip. Picture the impact this has on the rest of the shirt, particularly when you move, compared to what happened with the wetsuit. The same single layer limitation applies but this analogy highlights the transference of strain through the musculo-fascial system caused by

restrictions. Mobile areas have to do more, even to the point of strain, to compensate for those areas that are locked down.

### *The fluidity model*

As demonstrated by Gil Hedley's "fuzz speech" on You Tube, fascia is highly responsive to use patterns. The maintenance of its flexibility and fluidity is dependent on movement and use. The multi-layered nature of the musculo-fascial system means that each layer needs to be able to glide, move, engage and release cooperatively but also independently, for 'expansional balance' to have any chance of being present.

Move very consciously in multiple layers of clothing and you begin to get a sense of this. Try it first with layers of close fitting wool or cotton clothes. Then try it with clothes of synthetic materials. The synthetics slide a little more easily, more like the fluid fascial layers (assuming no static charge builds up). The natural fibres tend to feel a bit 'sticky' simulating what Hedley calls "fuzz" or the build up of stickiness and stiffness in the connective tissue layers.

It is worth persevering to develop a first hand sense of the physical characteristics of connective tissue. Not least because the function of this myofascial web is not limited to the creation and maintenance of our physical form. It also acts as an 'organ of awareness', notably in the following ways:

Our awareness of space and our relationship to our external and internal environment takes place at least in part through our soft tissue and the nervous system embedded within it. Proprioceptors (orienting nerve endings) gives us information about our position and our sensory engrams (learnt patterns 'wired' into our nervous systems) tell us whether that is the 'right' place to be or not. Nociceptors (danger receptors) tell us about pain or the risk of pain.

While it is true that there is generally some central nervous system involvement, our sense of 'my experience' is literally distributed throughout all of the tissues and perhaps even cells of our bodies. It might be argued that, because our sensory awareness extends outwards into our surroundings it is not even limited by the boundary our skin!

We can even show that our emotions are essentially body based and primarily expressed through the soft tissues and organs. Our emotional tones whether in the OK or not OK categories always have a 'felt sense' that accompany them. Being angry is far more than an intellectual state. It is a full body experience involving muscle tone, nervous system activation, floods of hormones, elevated heart rate and the cessation or initiation of physiological processes as diverse as digestion and the mobilisation of energy stores in muscles.



There is also a growing body of scientific evidence that considers the energetic activation and communication processes that seem to occur through the soft tissue matrix. From a practical perspective this gives us a way of thinking about the 'restrictions' in the musculo-fascial web that we referred to above in the 'gripped shirt analogy'.

*Lock down areas* – are epitomised by an excess of 'stuck' energy (or activation) that grips an area of the body and typically limits or eliminates movement through this area. A word that may be used to describe these areas is 'guarded'.

*Lock out areas* – are epitomised by a lack or absence of energy (or activation) as if there is no 'pipework' or connection to the area in question. A word that may be used to describe these areas is 'inertia' or 'emptiness'.

This language can be useful in telling us what we need to do. Instead of merely telling us where in the body something is happening, it can give us a sense that more or less 'activation' may be required. Sometimes this is enough of a verbal clue for us to find a non-verbal response – engaging or letting go, resulting in more mobility, strength or simply, ease.

Recent scientific studies may even be beginning to bridge the gap between the reductionist approach of western medicine and the integrated and energetic perspectives of the yoga traditions. In the meantime, the opportunity exists as a modern practitioner to combine the two in a way that may prove more effective than using either alone. I can feel my way into a posture by focusing on where energy (sensation) seems blocked. Simultaneously, I can recognize that a particular 'block' felt during a deep forward or backward movement of the neck, may correlate to the impingement of blood flow through the cranial base to the brain. Western medicine tells us that such impingement raises the risk of stroke significantly. Both perspectives encourage me to find a way to practice asana that feels (sensation) easy and open and will likely increase my sense of health and well-being.

### Whole body awakening

Functional anatomy encourages an approach to asana, and indeed all yoga practice, that is based on slowing down, tuning in and refining our ability to sense what is present. Approached in this way yoga practice becomes the cultivation of embodiment, of exploring 'what's going on' through the body.

Robin describes it as the process of spreading conscious awareness into the domain of sub-conscious. I call it 'whole body awakening'.

Yoga postures, with their demands for unfamiliar and unusual posture and movement, provide an ideal vehicle for this process. However, whole body awakening can be undertaken anywhere, in any body position, whether new or familiar. While walking, for example, if we slow down, tune in and expand our sense of what is present, we are practicing embodiment. Conversely, if we practice yoga postures without such awareness, we may simply be maintaining a 'disembodied' way of being.

It might be described in this way :

*As I move into an asana, I try to maintain a clear but unified sensory awareness that monitors stretch/compression, activation/relaxation throughout the whole connective tissue field. With practice I develop a multi-layered sensitivity rather than simply a 'wetsuit' type visualisation. As I continue, I scan for lock down or lock out areas, softening into the former and perhaps directing breath connected movement into the latter. I explore the boundaries of my 'comfort zone' aware that it is, in part at least, a function of sensory engrams (my sense of 'normal'). By moving slowly and carefully, and without ignoring pain signals or stress indicators (shaky limbs or cramping muscles), I may find it possible to increase my range of movement and/or available strength by reorganising the whole connective tissue field. This may require additional recruitment in some areas and greater let go in others. Sometimes these shifts occur at a distance from the location in the body that initially feels like the source of limitation.*

Clearly, this a very different approach to simply trying to make the shape of the asana by focusing on the 'end point' as demonstrated by the teacher or next door student. Furthermore, this whole body awakening allows posture practice to become a laboratory in which we 'explore' aspects of embodiment that may ripple out into the rest of our lives. What's going on? Why this way?

### Right effort

In the context of yoga asana the cultivation of 'right effort' is an essential skill. Yoga postures can be seen as a practice where we learn to navigate the spectrum of action and stillness, often occupying different parts of the spectrum within the body simultaneously.

The example given earlier of the marathon runner turned yoga practitioner highlights one of the reasons why 'right effort' might be considered an essential ingredient of practice. If individuals begin yoga asana practice with a "more is better" or "no pain, no gain" attitude, then, as the knee story illustrated, injury is a very real risk.

Sometimes however, the converse is true, and a student begins practice with an aversion to effort. Such students are often rather weak physically.

Depending on body type, this too can create a situation in asana practice where the risk of injury is increased. The individual may be 'naturally' flexible but without the strength to stabilise vulnerable body areas in yoga asana.

The concept and practice of right effort is therefore of great use along the whole spectrum of body types and practice mentalities engaging with yoga asana.

As a minimum, right effort may be thought of as doing enough but no more, than is required to enter and maintain a posture without strain or collapse. At more refined levels, right effort is achieving the delicate and dynamic balance between engagement and relaxation that puts the practitioner firmly in the part of the activity spectrum that might be labelled 'grace'. Expressed in this way, whether in a strenuous and dynamic posture or lying in savasana, a kind of ease is present. In savasana (corpse pose), that ease may be maintained for an extended period. In an arm balance, perhaps only for a few breaths. But in either case, if right effort is present, a graceful ease exists.

To the eye of even an untutored observer such ease is clearly visible. To the practitioner, there are various terms and indicators that point to the being in such a state.

Descriptive words that might be used to describe the state of 'right effort' include – balanced, poised, effortless, relaxed, contained, grounded, energised, etc. Different words may apply depending on whether the asana in question emphasises 'letting go' or 'engaging'. In all postures, even savasana, there is an interplay between these two ends of the effort spectrum. Right effort is about finding the 'sweet spot' on that spectrum applicable to the moment.

As the earlier examples indicate, most yoga practitioners have pre-existing tendencies that affect their search for right effort. Some of us routinely default to 'try too hard' and others to 'try too little'. Understanding which of these tendencies we hold can be useful in working skilfully in asana.

It is also worth noting that a common phenomenon in the search for right effort is what might be called the 'pendulum process'. This can happen in one area of the body or more generally. Essentially, we recognise (or someone points out) that we are over-engaging an area of the body in a particular asana. Perhaps this is even a theme across multiple postures. A common example might be the tendency to tighten the gluteal area during back bending.

As a good student we pay attention to this and make a conscious effort to relax through the area whenever we are back bending. Sometime later our teacher points out that we are not really engaging the glutes in standing balances. Again, we pay attention and notice that we have gone from a general tendency to overtighten the glutes in almost every pose to the situation where, at least in some asana, we are failing to engage enough. The pendulum has swung too far the other way.

Being aware of the likelihood of this process as we tune in to the optimum balance of effort and relaxation that comprises right effort may help us keep the swings of the pendulum within a narrower margin of error.

### Dancing in gravity – may the force be with you

Yoga asana teaches us to pay attention to those aspects of our embodiment that may previously have been ignored. The cultivation of sensory awareness, of connection to ground, of our breathing patterns, and so on. One of the key areas of awakening for many of us, is to the play of gravity through our bodies.

Of course, at one level we are all aware of gravity. Walking uphill requires more effort than walking on the flat. If I lose balance, I fall to the ground. But most of us give very little conscious attention to the arrangement of our bodies in relation to gravity.

A very simple experiment illustrates the relevance and potential benefits of increased gravitational awareness in asana, and indeed, in life in general.

Stand as naturally as you can. Then, keeping your body straight, simply lean forward a little so that your weight shifts towards your toes. Go as far as you can while maintaining your position without falling forward. Then see what you feel through the whole of the body. Repeat the exercise while leaning backward so that your weight shifts into your heels.

The effort required to maintain the lean positions is considerably more than the neutral. Of course, this also applies to any asana so finding our centre of gravity in any position enables us to minimise the degree of effort required to hold in place.

A simple asana example might be a standing forward bend (uttanasana). Again, to illustrate the impact of gravitational awareness, try this. Stand with feet hip width apart and consciously hold the pelvis and legs in place as you hinge forward and down from the hips. Do not allow your sit bones and bottom to move backwards as you come forwards. If in doubt stand with your back to a wall. Next repeat the movement with a real focus of initiating movement from the middle of the body around your navel. With this area as

your focal point (and centre of gravity), allow your pelvis to draw backwards as your upper body folds forwards. Do it evenly so that you remain balanced around your centre of gravity. Notice the difference in terms of effort and ease of stretch along the back of the body.

Most people find it much easier to both move and let go into the forward bend when they move around the centre of gravity. As this asana example has perhaps already intimated, we may sub-consciously and very naturally try to stay balanced in asana. It may well have felt quite alien to stop your hips from moving backward in the forward bend for example. However, just as breathing is perfectly natural but can be refined enormously through yoga practices, so can our relationship to gravity.

In addition to learning to maintain a much greater sense of balance (and therefore ease), there is a second territory of exploration in asana that is available once we tune in to the force of gravity.

Some people call this territory 'push back' energy. It is the sense of 'up' we experience locally or generally, when we clearly allow a sense of 'down'. We'll look at examples in a moment but first let's link this to hard science for anyone that might be hearing a 'wacky new age nonsense' alarm going off in their head.

Newton's third law of motion states that :

'for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction'

The statement means that in every interaction (for example between your feet and the floor), there are a pair of forces acting on the two interacting objects. The size of the forces on the first object equals the size of the force on the second object. The direction of the force on the first object is opposite to the direction of the force on the second object. Forces always come in pairs. They are equal and opposite.

In simple terms – our mass is resting 'down', while the mass of the Earth is resting 'up'.

As we cultivate our awareness of gravity we naturally develop our sensitivity to the downward pull or grounding effect of this universal force. It is acting in relation to our earth – the biggest mass object in our vicinity. We become more attuned to what many yoga practitioners call their foundation or sense of ground. Doing so increases our sense of stability and connection. We feel supported and, with a little practice and coordination, balanced over our foundation. Of course, our foundation does not need to be our feet! It can be any part of our body depending on our position – head, hands, bottom or back.

But we can also begin to cultivate our awareness of the reaction force from the ground – the push back energy, up energy, lightness or simply the 'Up'. The 'Up' is a good name because that is what this feels like in the body.

As we tune into the interplay between 'ground' and 'up', we can explore the ability to consciously 'lean' into one or the other. If I am wobbly in a one legged standing balance, sinking into the foundation foot and really attending to the 'down' feeling of gravity can help me stabilise.

If, in a seated twist, I am looking to find some length in my spine to facilitate the twist, tuning into the 'up' feeling may help bring me up and out of my pelvis.

We can even magnify these sensations with the breath. Tuning into the up during the inhale can really help magnify the sense of lightness and lengthening experienced. Conversely tuning into the down on the exhale can really help magnify the sense of foundation and stability experienced. Our attention in both cases seems to lead to what feels like an increase in the force. Whether or not this is actually the case, the result is that functionally, I can 'sense' myself towards feeling more grounded or lighter or both at the same time!

This is where the exploration of asana becomes less about muscles and bones and more about energetics, quite literally.

Different teachers and different traditions describe this in different ways. Some schools frame this down-up dynamic in relation to Uddiyana and Mula bandha. Some use anatomical references, the lumbar-sacral junction in Scaravelli teachings for example. The Hara or Dantian in martial arts and Traditional Chinese Medicine describe the same area in energetic terms. In all cases what is being pointed to is an energetic connection to ground that can be cultivated to enhance both foundation and 'Up'. In doing so, many of the traditions suggest there is an increase in stable vitality generally throughout the body. We feel energised without feeling 'hyped' or manic. We feel grounded, without feeling heavy or lethargic.

### Deep space explorations (journey of the breath)

Overlapping significantly with the down-up explorations described above are a body of practices collectively referred to as breath awareness and control. Pranayama is the term in yoga. These practices are considered by many teachers to be best learnt and explored once some degree of stability has been gained through yoga asana. Here though, we are not relating specifically to pranayama. Rather we will consider multiple reasons for

closely attending to the breath during the practice of yoga asana (as well as in pranayama).

It is worth noting perhaps that schools of yoga differ significantly in the emphasis placed on the breath in asana. However, there are some compelling reasons to consider the breath closely as part of asana practice.

Firstly, how we breathe changes quite radically depending on the amount of effort we are expending. The harder we work, the more strained our position, the more forceful, and often shallow, our breathing. At times it can literally feel like we are struggling to take a breath.

If we are running up a hill or working hard in the gym, then such a breath response is the body's way of urgently sourcing more oxygen to feed the activities of the muscles. In asana practice too, there is sometimes the need for strong, fast breathing simply to fuel the muscles. However, there are two other common reasons that the breath may accelerate and become more shallow in asana.

The first possibility is that we're using far more effort than is actually required to enter and maintain a state of asana. This can affect the breath in two ways. Muscular tension (particularly in the abdomen and back) can literally make it more difficult to take a full breath by impeding the expansion of the lungs. In addition, excess tension can result in a significantly increased aerobic load on the body meaning more oxygen is required.

When we detect the shift in breath from deep, calm and easy to strained, if we identify and let go of overworking areas, we can often maintain the same asana with much less work and a consequent easing in the breath.

A second common reason for strained breathing in asana practice is that an emotional response tied up with our autonomic nervous system has triggered a 'fight or flight' type activation. This is the sub-conscious response of the sympathetic nervous system triggered by a perceived threat of some kind. We often experience this emotionally as anger or fear.

If I am frightened of backbends or inversions, my fear is expressed through the activation of my sympathetic nervous system. This not only increases my breath rate but stimulates increased muscle tone in general and of the startle reflex muscles in particular. In the case of the latter, any triggering of these muscles, which include the abdominals and the psoas, results in flexion (forward bending) of the body. At its extreme we reflexively curl into the foetal position to protect our vulnerable organs. Clearly even a partial forward bending response of this kind is counterproductive when attempting to backbend. It may also make it much more difficult to balance upright (in headstand for example).

So, as in the overwork example, watching the breath and consciously trying to maintain a smooth, deep, even rhythm, literally softens the 'fear response' and makes the asana easier to access and maintain.

Over the course of a practice, seeking to maintain this deep easy breath rhythm essentially down regulates the sympathetic nervous system and stimulates the parasympathetic system. The result is that we feel calm and relaxed. This can even be the case when we've worked hard during the practice. The key is the breath, the mechanism the autonomic nervous system.

A second reason to consider breath during asana is that it can also have a considerable impact on range and direction of body movement. At its most obvious, trying to bend forward while taking a deep inhale is a lot more difficult than making the same movement on an exhale phase. Less obvious to the average person is that the opposite is also broadly true. Moving into a backbend is often facilitated by coordinating the movement with an exhale. In both cases it is not quite as clear cut as this but as a rule of thumb for beginners this can be a useful starting point.

There appear to be two processes at play. The first relates to the mechanical influence of the ribs and through them the spine. In a reasonably open body, breathing deeply (ie with movement through the abdomen, diaphragm and thoracic areas), the curves of the spine tend to flatten on the inhale and deepen on the exhale. This means that the spine lengthens on the inhale and shortens slightly on the exhale. In forward bending the muscles on the back of the body need to lengthen and exhaling facilitates this. In back bending the curves of the upper and lower spine initially need to deepen and again exhaling facilitates this. In both cases, at a certain point the balance of benefit shifts. The slight front body elongation associated with the inhale helps to complete the journey into both deep forward and backward bends.

The second process has to do with the volume of the torso. A full breath typically contains a little less than half a litre of air. While this may not sound much, it adds to the contents of the body in a way that is felt primarily in the area of the chest and abdomen. At the same time the muscles of respiration are actively directing the opening and closing of the area. Forward bending during an inhale therefore involves bending (closing) into a front body that is already expanding (opening) both passively through the increased volume of the lungs and actively through the muscles of respiration.

As with the spinal curve influences, the importance of these processes can vary widely between people. If your hamstrings are screaming in a forward bend or your shoulders are so stiff that drawing them back in back bending is



really tough, then the influence of the breath is likely to be secondary. If however, you are working towards the limits of forward or backward bending, and particularly if you are of slim build, the influence of the breath may be considerable.

At its subtler extreme, breath awareness can be used as a way to generate space throughout the whole body. Visualising expansion and lengthening of torso and limbs during the inhale can feel like breathing space into the soft tissues and even the joints. Allowing a settling back into the centre on the exhale can lead to a release of excess tension which in turn can create more space. It is subtle, but it can open up radically different experiences in yoga asana.

Thirdly, simple awareness and exploration of the breath in asana can make a big difference to the way we sense energy moving in and through our body.

As discussed above, breath awareness can cultivate a sense of space within the body – expanding on the inhale and settling back on the exhale. Space it seems is often accompanied by a feeling of potency, a filling up, an ‘energising’. In many yoga traditions an anatomy of energetics has been developed to explain these sensations. Western science has begun to explore the electrochemistry of connective tissue which may provide a bridge to the yoga teachings and the many ‘energy’ therapies (perhaps especially acupuncture) that exist in the world of complementary medicine. Maybe at some point in the future there will be a clear scientifically accepted perspective.

How you explain this experience almost doesn’t matter from a practical point of view. In yoga asana, it is often more useful to ask is this helpful, rather than is this true? If you find that visualising the expansive qualities of the breath as directing energy into or through the body, then it may help create steadiness, strength and space in asana practice.

Two examples can help illustrate different ways that this might be useful.

Ardha matsyendrasana is a seated twist in which one arm is positioned medially over the opposite bent leg. The outer upper arm and the outer thigh generate counterforces that enable the practitioner to lengthen and twist the upper body all the way through the torso and neck. Often this lengthening and hence twisting is limited by a feeling of stuckness in the hip or shoulder or both. Using the breath visualisation directed at creating space and ‘filling up’ with energy on the inhale phase, can be transformative in the way we open up and move upwards along the spine through the twist.

Virabhadrasana II or Warrior II is a well-known standing posture. The breath – energy visualisation that I find helps in this asana is slightly different to the previous example. In Virabhadrasana II, visualising the expansive inhale as

lengthening from the centre along five lines of energy – two legs, two arms and the midline of the torso – can help create balance and a sense of central lift. It reduces strain in the shoulders and hips and ‘unifies’ a posture that can otherwise feel like we’re trying to run off in four different directions at the same time.

The fourth reason to consider the breath relates to its link to the mind. It does not take long to realise in asana practice that if your attention wanders something is lost. It may be lost balance, engagement or relaxation that arises from such distraction. We also quickly learn that it is remarkably difficult to keep the mind still and focused by effort of will. I can adopt a yoga posture utterly determined to hold my attention in my body and concentrated on attaining the perfect balance of ease and effort that generates grace. Almost immediately my mind seems to decide to do things differently! The same mind that committed to doing something now does the exact opposite!

If I could record my mind stream during this process, it might sound something like this:

- OK, I’m going to really concentrate here and get this asana just right
- Here goes, I’m inhaling and moving into the pose, I can feel my legs engaging, right leg seems to be tighter than the left
- I wonder why it always seems to be my right leg?
- Maybe it is something to do with the way I was born like Sally was talking about last week
- I wonder how Sally is doing? She had a cold but hopefully that will be better by now as she was due to visit her mother this week.
- Damn – I lost concentration there. Supposed to be focusing on this asana, I’m exhaling now and the sensation of ground and lift seems to be a bit more balanced, right ankle tight, right ankle tight, right ankle tight....

And so on.

Using the metaphor of two lovers walking together, the mind and the asana dance together and apart. At times strolling easily hand in hand. At times clinging so tightly to each other that walking is hindered. And at other times walking in different streets! In a body doing the asana these correlate to optimal engagement / relaxation, over tensing or contracting, and dissociation or inertia.

The point here is that, even if our yoga goal is simply to get bendier and stronger, sooner or later we will have to consider the psychological aspects of practice. We’ll return to this theme in Part III. Here, though, let’s just

consider two practical applications of attention to, and regulation of, the breath during asana.

- developing concentration – focusing on the breath by cultivating sound or simply by resting the attention at a particular point (the nostrils for example), gives the erratic mind something to look at. A clear internal focal point makes it easier (although still not easy!) to stay focused on the task at hand. The mind stream may continue to come and go into commentary and analysis but cultivating a return to breath attention in each pause or whenever we notice we've 'wandered off', gradually increases our ability to focus. In doing so, it extends the time that we can remain absorbed in the task at hand. In other words in attending to 'what's going on' rather than being carried away by monkey mind.
- Influencing our psycho-emotional state – we can learn to use the breath to influence our mood and mental state. For example, slow deep breathing can help slow us down, bringing relaxation, improving balance and ease. Strong breathing can help generate strength and vitality, shifting mental states such as lethargy and fear by literally breathing them out.

Even in this simple introduction we can see that breath awareness in asana provides three distinct opportunities :

1. It enables us to witness how the mind wanders erratically and seemingly independent of our 'will' – it provides a '**mirror**' in which to observe monkey mind at work
2. It helps us develop concentration by acting as an '**attention holder**'
3. It helps us develop the ability to influence our psycho-emotional state by acting as a kind of '**steering wheel**'

Finally, the positive impact of breath quality on health may act as a motivator / intention setter during posture practice. Breathing like eating is obviously a necessity of life. But just as we can eat more or less healthily, we can breathe in a manner that keeps us alive or in a way that helps cultivate vibrant health.

This may be explained in a number of ways using both scientific and esoteric methods. However, here are two simple but profound examples of breath awareness relating to physical and psycho-emotional wellbeing.

Some years after beginning a regular yoga practice I attended a course on Emergency First Aid. One of the things we learnt to do was to track the breathing rate of casualties as an indicator of their state of health, alongside pulse, skin colour etc. We were told that a normal respiration rate for a resting human adult was between twelve and twenty breaths per minute. Elevated rates could be indicative of stress, pain and a number of medical

conditions. We practiced on each other. Mine was eight. Sitting at my desk writing this today after nearly twenty years of yoga, it is six.

While low respiration rate in some people can be indicative of health problems and may be associated with symptoms of hypoxia (not getting enough oxygen), in my case it simply seems to indicate that I need to breathe less frequently to get the oxygen my system needs. My breathing has become more efficient. I attribute this to breath related practices in yoga. Presumably the deep breathing practices of asana and pranayama have influenced my 'normal' breathing resulting in a fuller, more efficient breath pattern.

So what. Well, there would appear to be two direct consequences of this in terms of enhanced well being. The first consequence is a hypothesis on my part. That being, that because breathing involves muscular activity, it takes less energy to keep a body oxygenated using 8 breaths per minute than it does taking 16 breaths. This is to my knowledge unproven and certainly there is more body movement in a deep breath than in a shallow one which may involve greater energy expenditure per breath. But try it for yourself and see which feels like more work.

The second consequence has been thoroughly explored by science, although it has yet to find its way into mainstream public awareness. It is the relationship between the breath and the nervous system.

Much research has been done in the last thirty years on the links between stress and health. The autonomic nervous system, which for most people is outside of conscious control, regulates our stress response. If a threat is perceived, the sympathetic nervous system is triggered and our body is flooded with 'fight or flight' hormones that result in a number of physiological changes that enhance our ability to react. Once the threat passes and all is rosy in our world, the parasympathetic nervous system takes over and different hormones create conditions of 'rest and digest' in our system. Stress studies have shown that where the sympathetic nervous system remains active for extended periods, the immune system of the body becomes suppressed. Our ability to stay well is literally reduced.

The link to breath is this. When the sympathetic nervous system is active, we take shorter, shallower breaths. When the parasympathetic system is active, we take longer, deeper breaths. What's more, the old adage of 'take a deep breath and calm down' is a physiological fact. Consciously altering our breathing patterns has been shown to correlate to activation of either the sympathetic nervous system (in the case of short shallow breathing) or the parasympathetic system (in the case of deep breathing).

In simple terms, if we breath deeper, our stress levels will be lower and our digestive and immune systems will function more efficiently. That seems like a yoga goal at least as worthy as enhanced flexibility and strength.

### Limits and how to relate to them

A few years into regular yoga practice, someone asked me, "Does doing yoga mean that you believe you can do anything with your body?"

He was talking about asana and I replied that I did not think that was the case. That we practiced within the limits imposed by human anatomy.

While I still think that at one level that answer is correct, I would respond slightly differently to the same question today. In a nutshell – I do practice within limits. However, I recognise that those limits are probably not where I think they are and, moreover they are continually changing.

Over the years, my yoga practice has ebbed and flowed over a wide spectrum of experience. Deep experiences have arisen in simple standing or sitting or walking. Space and possibility have come from letting go in areas I was completely unaware were bound tight. Asana has been so much more and so much less than my thoughts have told me. I have injured myself by exceeding my body's physical limits. I have finally settled in to some ridiculous shape only to realise that the only thing that had been holding me back had been a change in breath, the letting go of a fear or the adoption of a visualisation. I have been wrong about the physical and psycho-emotional limits to practice so many times that the only thing that seems limitless is the capacity for increased awareness of what is and is not possible!

Adopting this approach of practicing within unknown limits involves the cultivation of a number of attributes :

- Compassion and respect for the body and the mental states associated with it
- A willingness to deeply listen, reflect and honestly consider what is present
- An ease with not-knowing
- An acceptance that practice seems to run in circles, leading us back to look again at practices we thought mastered and familiar, in order to unwrap a whole new layer of learning
- Patience

All these attributes serve us when we are exploring the edge of our potential. But they are also invaluable during those periods when illness, injury, fatigue or even just the passage of time, means that our asana practice is reduced or impede in some way.

There have been times in my yoga life when advanced asana were my daily practice. And there have been times when my physical practice has been geared towards creating enough mobility and strength to simply walk normally.

Without the cultivation of these attitudes of compassionate curiosity, it would be demoralising and frustrating to be constrained by circumstances to a reduced range of movement than we are accustomed to. And indeed such feelings do arise. But approaching asana practice with the attitude of 'what's going on right now?' means that something is always possible. And, what's more even very limited movement, particularly if combined with breath awareness, can be highly beneficial in creating and maintaining whatever mobility is available given the limits present in that moment. This is the basis of all skilful therapeutic yoga asana. It is also a springboard into the deeper layers of yoga where our mental patterns become the focus of our explorations.

### The power of intention and reflection

If I set out on a car journey, I know where I wish to go. I consult a map and plan a route to get there. As I travel I check the map to make sure I'm still on course. Today it is possible to hand over responsibility for route planning and progress checking to a satnav device of course, but we still need to programme in a destination.

The journey we take in yoga is no different to the one we take in a car. While our choice of destination may change over the years, it is generally a good idea to have a clear sense of where we're headed. Similarly, it seems wise to check periodically that we're on the right course and progressing towards our destination.

The power of such intention and reflection is that it clarifies and directs our practice. The following quote often attributed to Einstein illustrates the potential pitfall of practicing without such clarity.

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Renowned Mysore teacher Pattabhi Jois is often quoted as saying - "1% theory 99% practice". This is sometimes interpreted as a kind of surrender to practice. Another quote of his that is used to back up this idea of 'faith in practice' is - "do your practice, all is coming". But in my experience, the 1% theory is critical and Einstein's cautionary note is sound advice. Clarifying what we are trying to do and reflecting regularly and honestly on progress, helps us to adapt and develop in a way that keeps practice creative, engaging and transformational. We still need the 99% practice of course. Otherwise we may simply be daydreaming. But without the intention and

reflection we may be running on a wheel, going in circles, banging our heads on a wall or mindlessly causing long term injury. We can become asana slaves, rather than using practice as a vehicle through which to find freedom.

Your choice of intention is, inevitably and appropriately, highly personal. It may, however, be wise to have different levels of intention to help orient ourselves in both the short and long term. For example, I might choose to express my practice intention as :

- To develop and maintain strength and mobility to a level that enables me to enjoy life to the full. (long view)
- To practice this sequence in a way that means I remain at ease throughout all the asana and transitions (short view)

Or, if I am interested in the wider spectrum of yoga, I may make more generic intentions such as :

- To listen and speak from the heart, be easy in body and mind, be guided by stillness and embrace the world (long view).
- To touch the breath, listen wide and deep, pause often and move with awareness (short view).

However we frame our intentions, the idea is that the short view in particular guides our momentary engagement with practice, while the longer view keeps us moving in a consistent overall direction.

There is one more thing to say about this very personal aspect of the yoga journey. Practice for long enough and you need to be prepared for your intentions to change. This is where the reflection process is important. It can be challenging to admit that our ideas, beliefs, priorities etc have changed. Managing the inner dialogue and conflict that sometimes arises when this happens is a part of yoga practice in its own right. It is where the question 'who am I' comes to the fore.

### The fruits of embodiment – physical practice as a gateway to life practice

So far in this chapter, we have considered a selection of attitudes, perspectives and ideas that increase the likelihood of regular asana practice resulting in what we have referred to as 'embodiment' ie a state of enhanced awareness and ease.

To conclude, I'd like to use the words of long term practitioner and teacher Liz Warrington, to illustrate how such a process of embodiment may ripple out into our lives and engage with the wider inquiries of yoga.

*"I have come to the conclusion that my relationship with asana over the last 25 years is best understood in the light of Patanjali's few words regarding*

the practice of postures. He describes asana simply as *Sthirasukhamāsanam* which might be translated as 'postures that embody steadiness and ease'.

**Sthira** (steadiness) and **Sukha** (ease) are themes that showed up in the early days and continue to inform each hour I spend on my yoga mat. They have also come to be hugely significant in shaping how I am in life.

To be invited towards **Sthira** - stability and firmness - has led to experiences of embodiment and presence where before I might have been vague and disengaged or even dissociated. *Sthira* has provided the opening into the feeling state that informs me of the presence with which I am engaging with life at any time. Am I tasting the food I am eating, listening to another as they speak, seeing the mountains before me as they are today, different from yesterday, from this morning, or am I 'somewhere else', just going through the motions?

It has given me the sense of what it is to stand on my own two feet, trust myself and have a place from which to engage with challenging situations. To know where I am and what I am feeling as the steadiness of the body permeates the emotions. This is the practice of being with and staying with a posture, steady without becoming rigid, relaxed without becoming dull, taking tension out where it is not absolutely necessary in terms of support.

I've watched this mirrored in other areas of life. The phone call from a loved one declaring his infidelity. A message of anger from an old friend full of resentments that arrives unexpectedly on a New Year's Eve. In the drama of such situations, steadiness and presence help me stay connected to calmness, mental clarity and at times even wisdom and compassion.

The same process has shown me how habits and conditioning need no longer hold me in their grasp. That I have a choice, can start over, take a pause, a breath and give myself to a state of steadiness, opening into grace to experience the mind in its most natural of states, equanimous.

And from such steadiness *Sukha* arise - ease, bliss, being in a good space. *Sukha* is the experience of radiant well-being, of feeling totally nourished, open, whole and light, in an expanded state. Free from beliefs, opinions, comparisons, judgements, rationalizations, imaginings, planning, remembering, biases and ideas that in the 'non-yoga' state are constantly arising, ping-ponging me between feeling 'good', feeling 'not so good' and at times 'terrible'. *Dukha* (suffering) instead of the *sukha* (ease). I have come to realize that I have a choice.

The more familiar I become with knowing comfort and ease, happy-heartedness, not wanting for anything on the mat, the more I am able to move towards and cultivate this experience away from the yoga mat. I know



*what conditions support its flowering and which most definitely don't. What to say 'yes' to and what to say 'no'. When to leave the party and when to give my attention and whole being to something.*

*Then in the balance between sthira and sukha I get to experience the sense of connection that comes with all things, which if it weren't for sthira could be overwhelming. The doorway through which to relate from the heart and dare to be honest and vulnerable becomes available. Crying when there comes the impulse to cry, speaking up when such an act is deemed necessary in the face of injustice or ignorance, sharing and giving without the need to know what will come back to me.*

*Roles like teacher, practitioner, mother as well as personality traits that have been years in the making lose their meaning and relevance. The world of opposites (this is good or this is bad), preferences and attachments ceases to exist. Something bigger moves in as the extraneous drops away. I am continually amazed at how the whole spectrum of yoga is revealed through the play between effort and non-effort, the welcoming of sukha and sthira.*