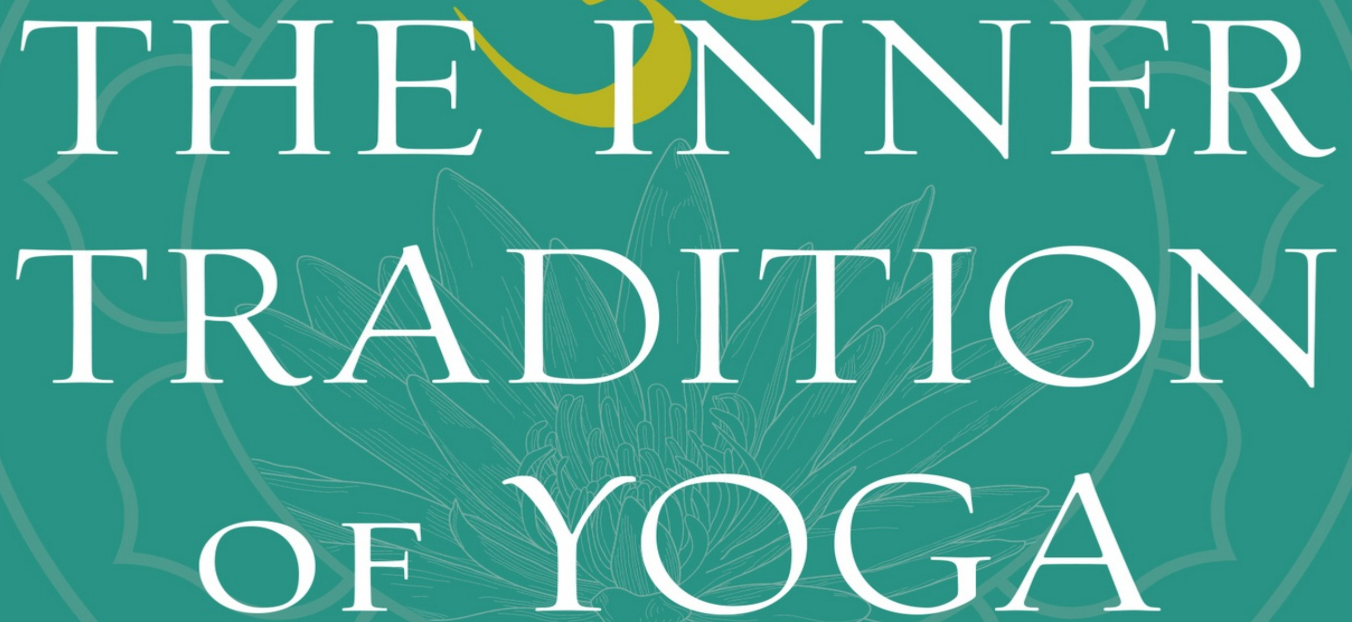

THE INNER TRADITION OF YOGA

A GUIDE TO YOGA PHILOSOPHY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTITIONER

MICHAEL STONE

REVISED EDITION

"Intense, poetic, wise, practical, intimate, and visionary—the mind-body connection has never been better explored or explained."
—Sharon Gannon, cofounder of Jivamukti Yoga

ALSO BY MICHAEL STONE

Awake in the World

Freeing the Body, Freeing the Mind

Yoga for a World Out of Balance

THE INNER TRADITION OF YOGA

A GUIDE TO YOGA PHILOSOPHY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTITIONER

Revised Edition

Michael Stone

Foreword by Richard Freeman

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To the students with whom I practice who inspire me to wake up.

“I do not know just what it is that I am like. I wander about concealed and wrapped in thought.”

—*Rig-Veda*

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Foreword

For yoga, these are the best of times, yet in some ways, these are the worst of times. The explosion in information technology is bringing people and their cultures, ideas, languages, religions, and businesses together at an exciting and disconcerting pace. So far, no one culture, no one religion, no one government is able to define an absolute frame of reference to organize the whole thing.

Spreading almost like mushrooms with the eclectic world culture of multinationals, Internet cafes, and Starbucks is the practice of yoga. There is something naturally appealing about the yoga postures to all types of people. Approaching reality through the immediate physicality of the body, the senses, and the breath skips right around religious, cultural, and national prejudice, and brings out a love of the best and most beautiful in everything. This draws people to yoga so that there are enthusiastic, sincere, and educated yoga practitioners in even remote corners of Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and all the Americas. Yoga has something remarkably universal about it. It is practically generic in its mysticism, which in its initial appeal to such a wide audience does not cast an oppressive net of a single belief, framework, or god-concept over the open and indeterminate process of living intelligence. There is still an innocence and naivety to the openness and enthusiasm shown worldwide for yoga. Can we keep the innocence as we become wise enough to see with love through the wily ways of our own egos? Or will that innocence be exploited by all the profiteering, proselytizing, seducing, and reducing done by our egos to avoid true yoga? Can our yoga survive the remarkable rate of its own expansion? Will the potent and ancient tradition live through its commercial success? These remain open questions for yoga enthusiasts on both the personal and the collective levels.

It is completely understandable why there is such a strong tendency to take the active ingredient out of yoga, to package it to please and to sell, to avoid the very heart of yoga and, thereby, to avoid reality. Genuine yoga exposes the

insubstantiality and emptiness of our self-image, which allows us to see the insubstantiality and emptiness of everything. Eventually, remarkable courage, commitment, and compassion arise from yoga practice and, through those, a wonderful insight and joy. Yoga is far nicer than anything we could have wanted or bargained for. We simply have not been able to wrap our minds around it, and so before investigating it on its own terms, we are selling it unopened and untasted in the spiritual marketplace. The traditional context for yoga, awakening to the simple truth of impermanence, to universal death, is all that has been missing. This is what awakens our compassion and shows us the interconnectedness not only of all beings but of techniques, styles, and viewpoints. It sobers the mind and wakes us up from spiritual pride and materialism.

Yoga has always been, and continues to be, subtle and impossible to express literally. Like love, it is taught with metaphor and poetry, with patterned practice and ecstatic release. Occasionally, and always in bad taste, the ego can trick us into imagining that our own specialized forms and languages have achieved universal status, when in fact they remain painfully provincial and riddled with blind spots. At any time, any yoga practitioner can grasp their practice form and language as literal and miss out on what is much more intelligent and pleasing. As humans with egos we can and frequently do mess up even the subtle and beautiful. Now our yoga is hitting the fan of the modern world. The variety of viewpoints, of techniques and styles, the attitudes and philosophies form a colorful array of trends mixed from the best and worst of modern cultures from all around the world. On the one hand, there are new extreme styles of raunchy party yoga, cult narcissism, condescending asceticism. This adoration of the ego is forming a path of competition and vanity. On the other hand, with so much information and cross-cultural linking, there are breathtaking new ways and languages for teaching and ever more refined forms of an art of a yoga worthy of passing on to others.

Michael Stone has given us a true gift, which allows us to approach the practices and philosophies of yoga from the place where their variety makes sense. He lets us begin where we are, surrounded by the situations of our heart. Our relationships and our beliefs about the world have a direct effect on the deep sensations in our body that link into emotion and perception. The link between the mind and the body, between the *citta* and the *prāṇa,* forms the axiom around which many internal yoga practices revolve. Observing sensation closely through mindfulness of the breath reveals the vibratory and impermanent nature of things

and allows the deconditioning of the mind from habitual patterns of response and association with those same sensations and feelings. *The Inner Tradition of Yoga* allows us to begin practicing on the deepest level before we commit to a viewpoint, a belief system, or a style. This psychological approach to yoga takes us straight into the heart of the misperceptions about who and what we are. To enter philosophy or yoga technique deeply, we must start grounded psychologically. We can then bypass the ego games that we might play when the subject of yoga is presented as difficult philosophy or as a physically stimulating and challenging art.

The Inner Tradition of Yoga looks at yoga as it is and then shows us a simple, compassionate way through the variety, complexity, and challenges that face us in our personal practice and, collectively, as we create a culture based in the most universal principles of yoga. It approaches yoga practice and philosophy from the immediate experience of our relationships, emotions, feelings, sensations, and thoughts within the context of our real lives. Inquiring about what really counts—what is right in the center of the heart—it offers insight into navigating the ocean of opinion, technique, and emotion.

We are encouraged to ask ourselves simple questions that might clarify our relationship with modern yoga. Does our yoga practice superficially cover up our miseries and distract us from the deeper work of the heart? Are we in love with the truth of life or are we in love with the image we see in the mirror? What is really important to us? Our backbends, arm balances, and the opinions that others have of us? When we come close to the end of this life, will our yoga practice have served us well? Will we pass into the unknown completely calm and joyous, full of love for all beings? Or will we have regrets?

Inquiring into the powerful feelings and sensations generated by the likes of love, family, birth, death, disease, old age, anger, lust, jealousy, pride, envy, fear, kindness, and compassion, *The Inner Tradition of Yoga* inspires the reader to patiently and openly stay with the practice, knowing that a real yoga practice is available within the joining of mind and body.

Richard Freeman
September 2007

Preface to the Revised Edition

In the summer of 2007, just before my son turned four, I went to Cape Cod at the invitation of a friend and wrote the book you now hold in your hands. It came to life just as the tiny sangha I started in my garage began to form in Toronto, where we integrated movement practices, textual study, meditation, and social action.

A decade later I now live on a small island on the coast of British Columbia where forest and ocean and family are all pressed together. Our yard is filled with fruit trees, and in the early mornings I watch the ocean arrange it self: blue and green, rising and falling, common and also a miracle. Our small community has grown to an international network without walls, and my partner is pregnant with what will be my fourth child.

I used to wake with the birds, practice forty-five minutes of sitting meditation, followed by almost three hours of asana practice. Each week I had structured time for study, and I was constantly going on silent retreats. Now, I travel internationally, and I see my formal practice (I still meditate and study and practice movement) much more integrated into daily activities, like washing the dishes and picking up Legos after the kids fall asleep. Now I like to invert how I conceive practice: the spiritual practice is answering emails and making the bed, and the informal practice is sitting still and lighting incense.

There is no daily practice without some formal training; and there is no deep spiritual training without the mess of relational life. The two are one.

In this new edition I've edited any areas where I've idealized a liberation that's free from the suffering of being human. There is no way beyond this human life. Yoga is a practice that helps us be more present with the actual, fluid life we are living right now. Yoga is a practice of being intimate with moment-to-moment reality, without holding on. Since being alive in this way teaches us that our actions have an echo, we begin to see that how we speak, move our body, and use our minds is both a gift and a responsibility. The more we see through our reactivity, while transforming the momentum of old habits, the more we begin to enjoy our lives and tune in to the pain and joy and experience of others.

My emphasis in editing this new edition has been to keep the theory I've

learned tied to the path I'm living, and that's why I've focused on the key themes that there is no awakening separate from the body; the self is a construct that can be seen and released again and again; that everything is empty except of relationship; and that our actions make a difference. We are all living, rejoicing, crying, and dying together. It's my deep intuition that there is really no other way to engage in a life that matters than to feel for each other, take in the plight of our planet, and do whatever we can within our means, to serve. The ways we can serve are only limited by our creativity.

There is no yoga without the conditions of your life. This book describes how to work with those conditions and see that there is just this one precious moment; it contains the past and the future, and we can't hold on to it.

Michael Stone

Southern Gulf Islands, British Columbia, 2017

A Note on Pronunciation of Sanskrit Terms

THE TRANSLITERATION of Sanskrit into English is always an approximation at best. The short *a* in Sanskrit is pronounced like the *u* in the English word *but,* and the long *ā* is pronounced like the *a* in *father.*

In terms of the family of consonants, an easy approximation is possible by pronouncing *c* as in *church, j* as in *jump, ṣ* as in *shut, s* as in *sun,* and *ś* as something halfway between the previous two. Aspirated consonants are quite distinct: *bh* as in *cab horse, dh* as in *madhouse, gh* as in *doghouse, ph* as in *top hat,* and *th* as in *goatherd.* The letter *r* is a vowel, pronounced somewhere between *ri* as in *rim* and *er* as in *mother.* The transliterated letter and character *n*, found in a word like *Patañjali,* can be pronounced like the *ni* in *onion,* and when found with the letter *j* in the word *prajña* can be pronounced like the *gn* in the word *igneous.*

Sometimes I pluralize a word like *yama* by simply adding an *s*, resulting in *yama*s, which is unacceptable for the academic or Sanskritist, but essential for simple reading for those unfamiliar with the language. Unless otherwise attributed, the translations are my own. Try your best pronouncing these new sounds—as you get used to them they open the palate and help concentrate the mind. Enjoy!

Introduction

IN A SMALL second-floor room at the Marpa House in Boulder, Colorado, several hours after we finished an intense practice of back bending, the eighty-three-year-old Indian yoga master Sri K. Pattabhi Jois held court for three hours, inviting students to sit down and ask him questions. I sat at the side of the room, eager to participate in the discussion and also interested in observing how he fielded questions from students in an entirely different cultural context than Mysore, India. In his typically quiet way, smiling and wondering if he knew any students from previous meetings, Guruji sat in front of a Tibetan *thangka* painting that draped behind him like a saffron moon.

I was struck by the variety of cultures in the room that day. Eager American Hatha Yoga practitioners, sitting in a room with a Brahmin, who himself was sitting in front of a colorful Tibetan Buddhist painting depicting the Buddhist deity of compassion. Outside the door, Guruji's host and respected American yoga teacher Richard Freeman greeted visitors, who would take off their shoes, bow down to Guruji's feet, and look up at him, waiting for one of his familiar sayings, for instance, "One by one, all is coming." Barefoot and eager to meet this foreign Indian yoga master, students sat cross-legged on velvet cushions and graciously bowed to him before sitting up with spines in perfect posture.

Guruji smiled, sometimes posing for a photograph and at other moments becoming a touch shy. Students filed through the room all afternoon, Guruji's attention unwavering.

I was surprised to hear most students primarily asking simple questions related to physical postures, to which he seemed indifferent. "How long will it take to practice a good back bend?" one student asked; Guruji smiled without reply. Another student asked if Guruji could recommend a way to practice forward bends with less pressure on his knees. Guruji replied with a much-awaited and by now famous line, "Many lifetimes, all is coming."

Yet when people would ask him questions about movements of energy, how to work with the mind, *kuṇḍalinī,* or esoteric texts, he would light up and begin quoting *śāstras,* traditional texts, memorized with depth and accuracy. Unless one knew Sanskrit, his responses were vague and incomprehensible. When Guruji was excited about a question, he almost never answered in English.

I was struck by the variety of sources from which he quoted: the *Yoga-Sutra, Bhagavad Gītā, Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Ṛg-Veda*, *Yoga Taravali*, *Hatha Yoga Pradīpika,* and a few other Sanskrit references with which I was unfamiliar.

As the afternoon rolled on and the meeting became more intimate, I noticed that Pattabhi Jois touched his heart every time he spoke of breathing, self, or god. At one point, I raised my hand and asked him this: "Guruji, every time you talk about breathing, God, or the present moment, you touch your heart. Can you say something about that?"

He paused a moment as he scanned the room, raised his glance in my direction, and enthusiastically responded.

"When students breathing," he said, "trying to practice yoga, breathing into heart. Students breathe into heart looking for God right here. God is in heart. Students want to find God but not finding God. Students breathe into heart finding enemies."

"Enemies?" I asked. "What do you mean 'enemies'? Enemies in the heart?"

"Students finding enemies in heart. Six enemies," he said. *"Kāma, krodha, moha, lobha, mada, mātsarya."*

"What do these words mean?" I asked. He could not find the English equivalent. Someone mentioned that maybe he meant jealousy, envy, and possibly greed. Another thought he spoke of hatred.

Then someone else asked a question, and the room was on to another topic.

Over the next few days, I couldn't stop thinking about these six enemies. What were they? What prevents the heart from opening? Of what are these six enemies symptomatic? What is the relationship between breathing and the divine? How did these enemies act as obstacles to freedom? I had many questions but did not have another chance to ask Pattabhi Jois, since his two-week teaching session was coming to an end. All that I was able to understand at the time was that the six enemies referred to the six poisons: *kāma* (desire), *krodha* (anger), *moha* (delusion), *lobha* (greed), *mada* (envy), *mātsarya* (sloth). These six poisons are symptomatic of a heart unsatisfied, a life characterized by suffering.

We begin practicing yoga postures in an effort to relieve suffering and find a way to meet life with less effort and more flexibility. Yoga is a path out of suffering. But what we find after our initial foray or honeymoon period is a matrix of psychological and physical holding patterns that have captured our minds and bodies within tightly conditioned parameters.

Some time later, I had the opportunity to ask Pattabhi Jois how to work with the poisons of desire, anger, delusion, greed, envy, and sloth, to which he responded, in an answer that would radically change my understanding of yoga and psychology in general, "Understanding the heart by understanding the five *kleṣa*s. Knowing five kleṣas, no more poison; no more poison, no more *duḥkha.*"

What Pattabhi Jois describes with his antidote of the five kleṣas is a reference to the *Yoga-Sutra* attributed to the sage Patañjali, which describes in detail the five factors that keep us spinning in the conditioned wheel of suffering. The symptoms of unmediated desire, laziness, greed, envy, and other poisons are manifestations of deeper psychological factors, namely the five kleṣas. These five factors that contribute to our discontent concisely sum up the essential teachings of yoga psychology. Getting down to the roots of suffering and its corresponding symptoms requires an investigation of the five kleṣas. All practices of yoga, including meditation, breathing techniques, ethics, postures, and devotional practices, bring the practitioner into contact with the core of the heart. Along this path of the heart one is sure to find obstacles. One cannot work with the body without also working with the mind, because when we work with the symptoms of discontent, we begin to see that physiology and psychology are inseparable. The five kleṣas describe yoga psychology in a nutshell.

Avidyā can be defined as "not being with life as it is." It comes from the root *vidyā,* which in Latin becomes *vidéo,* refined into English as *video,* meaning "to see." When you put the prefix *a* before a word in Sanskrit, it turns that word into its opposite; in this case *a* denotes *not* seeing things clearly. Avidyā is descriptive of a state of mind and body unengaged with the present moment, unaware of reality as it really is.

Raga (attachment) is the desire to repeat pleasurable experience. *Dveṣa* (aversion) is the leaning away from what is unpleasurable. Moment after moment, day after day, we flip-flop back and forth between raga and dveṣa, reactive patterns in mind and body that keep us from being present by trying to either cling to pleasure or avert displeasure.

Asmitā is the construction of the stories of "I, me, and mine." Asmitā refers to

the construction of a self around which our perceptual world pivots. Whenever there is either attachment or aversion, there is the birth of a story of "me." The stories of "I, me, and mine" are generated when we identify consciousness with pure awareness and thus create a gap in our experience between what is actually occurring and the deep-seated need to filter what is happening through stories about ourselves. Constantly perceiving our experience through the lens of "me" creates separation from the nature of what is arising in the present moment and consequently gives rise to *duḥkha,* a feeling of lack and alienation.

Abhiniveśa is the fear of letting go of the story of "I, me, mine." The fear of death entails more than the loss of this body, rather it goes to the heart of our deepest attachment: the stories of "me" and the corresponding belief in a substantial and enduring self. Abhiniveśa is the thirst for further existence. It is the fear of letting go of all forms of attachment and aversion, because the splitting of experience into "me" and "that," subject and object, secures the existence of our limited—and yet safe—feeling narrative of "me." Letting go of this is terrifying. Yet when we let go of the continual construction of a self or even the need to be a "somebody," then we are free to be who we are. When we are completely ourselves, we forget about needing to be the center of our perceptual world and thus we can take in others and our environment with greater sensitivity, compassion, and openness.

In essence, Pattabhi Jois described what many yoga practitioners experience as practice matures, namely, that one cannot work exclusively on the physical aspects of yoga without also working with the psychological dimension of practice. To leave out the role of psychology in shaping and determining our way of being in the world is to bypass the deeper layers of yoga practice—layers that ultimately cause us to repeat habitual rounds of discontent and distress. We can experience, without doubt, certain physical transformations that occur when we practice yoga postures, but to drop into deeper holding patterns requires an attention span without preference or aversion—a mind that can be present with whatever shows up in the field of awareness. Otherwise, our deeper holding patterns produce recurring symptoms, described in Sanskrit as *granthi,* which literally refers to the knots of mind and body. These knots are known initially through the symptoms of discontent, namely the six poisons.

The poisons, when left unconscious, lead to unskillful actions, which generate *karma,* the infallible activity of cause and effect that reverberates through each individual and the web of life as a whole. Actions stemming from the symptomatic conditions described by Pattabhi Jois as "enemies in the heart" give

rise to suffering both internally and externally. Pattabhi Jois was saying, in very few words, that all forms of suffering—physical and psychological—are caused by these five kleṣas and that when one investigates the way in which these kleṣas operate, both on and off the yoga mat, the path of the heart opens up. If the kleṣas are not studied and deconstructed, one by one, the symptoms of dissatisfaction dominate our modes of perception and our basic actions. All symptoms assert themselves because they need attention. Rather than approaching the six poisons as symptoms that we need to be rid of with a problem-solving attitude, we instead look deeply into the underlying causes of these symptoms, namely the five kleṣas, and in doing so, we turn the symptoms of our suffering into the very path itself.

When Pattabhi Jois touched his heart in a simple gesture of breathing and then went on to describe the enemies that reside in the heart, which are nothing other than the symptoms that manifest when we don't see things as they are, I realized that yoga practice matures, not by adding more and more spectacular postures but by simply paying attention to the movements of the breath in the space of the heart and the role of the mind with the body, not apart from it. The five kleṣas describe the essence of yoga: a path of freedom from our habitual cycles of discontent.

1. *Vidyā*

SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE

YOGA BEGINS IN the present moment, and the present moment begins in silence. From that silence, words are born. The *Yoga-Sutra*, attributed to the mythological author, Patañjali, in the fourth or fifth century, is considered one of the core texts of yoga psychology. It begins simply: *"Atha yogānuśāsanam."* This can be translated as "In the present moment is the teaching of yoga."

Originating in the Gupta Empire of Northern India, in the same areas where the Buddha taught centuries earlier, the *Yoga-Sutra* is different than most western spiritual texts. It is not a speculative work of philosophy or metaphysics. It does not offer a theology of creation or a final comment on what's in store for us after death. Instead of telling us what is to come or a story of what came before, it presents its readers with the conception of creation and death coexisting in sequence with the arising and passing away of each moment. Every inhalation is a birth, and the end of every exhalation is a small death. In each consecutive moment, over and over again, the universe arises and passes away on the thread of a breath cycle.

It is vital, in embarking on a study of yoga, to go slowly with the words we have been given. I would like to take time with the seemingly simple words we encounter to unpack some of their layered meaning. I treat these teachings as maps rather than philosophy, and I use them to help orient my own practice of settling reactivity, undoing old habits, and awakening my own heart.

The first word in the *Yoga-Sutra*—*atha*—literally means "now," or "what is here in this moment." Patañjali is communicating that yoga is something that begins in the present moment, or that yoga *is* the present moment. We could more concisely translate this opening line as: "Yoga begins now." So, the teachings of yoga orient us toward this very moment, and this renders the future invisible and the past out of reach.

It is common for many scholars and practitioners to translate *yoga* as a form of the verb *yuj*—"to unite"—which turns yoga into something one does, a form of

willful activity. In thinking that yoga is the act of uniting one thing with another—breath with movement, body with mind, self with other—we risk confusing yoga with the doing of yoga. When we use the term in this way (as in "I'm going to practice yoga"), we confuse the techniques or the technology of practice with the experience of yoga. In every unfolding moment, in any meeting with any person, even in meeting ourselves, everything is complete. This completeness doesn't mean that everything is put together in some master plan. When we move through the world, "concealed and wrapped in thought," there is no direct contact with reality and we know not "who or what" we are. We cannot pursue or do reality. Therefore, yoga is not something we seek outside of ourselves. It is not something that comes from a willful attempt at union. Rather, it means that everything is interdependent, in flux, and empty of an ongoing core. It asks us to recognize, in the present moment, the unity of life. Union, this inherent interconnectedness of existence, is what in philosophical terms we call "nondualism," that is, the lack of separation between subject and object. Yoga begins with the gesture of a gentle bow in service of the present moment and a nondualistic vision of reality.

Yoga is a way of being and a mode of existing. Existence is a play of interconnection. The more we clarify our perception and ways of organizing our experiences, the more openness and compassion we bring to the profound and sometimes confusing undertaking of being in the world. The authentic practice of yoga is giving unremitting attention to present experience, whether in mind, body, or heart. It is attention that can be brought to any moment, whether we have a baby on the hip while we're making breakfast, or balancing the breath in a headstand.

According to yoga philosophy and psychology, the only place to begin an investigation of yoga—or of anything for that matter—is the present moment, because *this* is all that is actually occurring. The future has not yet arisen and the past has passed, and therefore the only thing we really have to investigate, and the only way to begin paying attention is from within this experience as it unfolds right here and right now. That is why an investigation into the nature of reality and the true nature of the mind begins in this life, this body, and this moment. It can't begin with an investigation of anything other than the here and now of our moment-to-moment, verifiable experience. This radical pairing down is what is necessary, because the mind, with all its fantastic, distracted, and creative potential, is so used to layering conceptions and preferences over the present moment that we are more often than not relating to our likes and dislikes rather

than to what is actually occurring in life. That is why psychological inquiry in the service of awakening begins with what is happening in the here and now—a form of present-centered attention with acceptance.

The mind has a hard time watching anything for very long, especially its own workings. The mind has a hard time being present as the breath moves in the body or as sensations arise and fall away in difficult experiences. As a result, we are not often present in our own life. This is true not just in relationship with our own bodies and emotions but interpersonally as well. We may often find that in reality other people and events interrupt our built-up fantasies about the way things are supposed to be. But this interruption is precisely what yoga is all about. We practice challenging and uncomfortable physical poses as a way of getting to the real. Through yoga we are becoming flexible enough to have our preconceptions and our elaborate tendencies interrupted. We want to find the space that our minds are always busy filling, because there the richness of reality exists. We usually discover a lot more in the silent space between thoughts than through all the interpretations, ideas, and views our minds generate. Moments of psychological stillness remind us that there are ways of knowing other than intellectual or habitual. Yoga practice, both on and off the mat, opens the heart by revealing our grasping and rigid patterns. This practice leaves no stone unturned. Through a disciplined and appropriately designed yoga practice, we not only come to see clearly our conditioned ways of living but we learn how to let go of those patterns so that we become comfortable with questions radically outnumbering answers. When we are open, and our habitual psychological and physical ways of being have loosened, we find ourselves free to respond to the present with a receptive and creative heart.

Yoga is an investigation into who and what we are. When we embark on this investigation we are not just looking at our everyday neuroses (though sometimes that is part of the path), nor are we sitting back to ponder metaphysics. Instead we are looking into the very nature of existence by starting with mind, breath, and body. This requires the cultivation of patience and an ability to accept what is occurring in our mind-body so we can see what arises clearly enough to study it. In this we may sense a seeming paradox. How do we study our own mind? How do we investigate our own body from within? How can an eye gaze at itself or a fingertip feel itself or an ear hear the sound of its own hearing? What does it mean to sense ourselves sensing when our perception is always hiding a shadow? We can never, it seems, see something in its entirety because there is always a blind spot in our perceptual field.

We have been taught to perceive our experience—and the entire universe—through labels. It is so ingrained to name all the "things" that seem to be "out there" and "solid" we hardly notice we are doing it. And yet this practice of identifying what is solid and out there allows each of us, and whatever we think of as the "self," to feel solid as well. But how solid is the self, and what is it made of?

We each have a body in space and time. When I feel my body internally, I feel breath, muscles, and bones, even the fascia and nerves. But I can't locate my body exactly. When I say the word "bone," I have not only a feeling but an image as well. The image comes from a skeleton I once saw in a lab. The word comes from our language and culture, but that word and image cannot touch the totality of the bones inside, moving and changing in relationship to the rest of my structure; likewise, when I feel the breath but can't tell exactly where it begins or ends or where it starts at the nostrils or its precise place of exit. And when I eat a carrot, I cannot tell, once I've started chewing, where the carrot ends and where my taste buds, my saliva, and my digestion begins. The carrot becomes part of me, but perhaps I am also becoming closer to this root vegetable in the exchange.

The body is not a static thing. In a sense the body is a series of concepts layered over concepts with changing sensations, feelings, perceptions, and breath.

Each of us can feel a form that we call "body," but it is impossible to truly say where it is or what it is. I don't know for certain where my body begins or ends, especially with my eyes closed. The body is not an actual thing that one can study—the body and the one who studies it are inextricably bound together. The observer and the body cannot be separated. Whether we examine the inner world of mind and body or the outer world of "things," we cannot find in our perception any "thing" that actually exists. In some sense we can say, "Here is a hand or a foot," but if I ask you to show me your ego, you would not be able to. You know you have an ego, but how do you know this? Where is it? Mostly we know through inference in the way we might know where our toe is when we stub it in a dark room. I know I have an ego when I act in a self-centered way, but that is a few steps removed from direct experience. I cannot find the mechanism called "ego," nor can I remove it. The ground is groundless. So, how do we determine what we are and what we are not? If we are to map a perimeter of our existence, where do we draw the line between where we end and where the external begins?

The fact is that the common distinctions we make between things is the very mechanism that creates "things" in the first place. Duality, the creating of a self

"in here" that perceives an object "out there," creates separateness and alienation. Dualism is not built into reality as it presents itself; dualism is constructed. This takes us straight to the heart of yoga. Yoga is a method of returning us to the inherent union and interconnectedness of all existence. This method has portable benefits: stable attention, trust in one's body and breath, increasing generosity, the capacity to forgive, and a love that's not bogged down by clinging and self-interest.

But again, coming back to the first statement in the *Yoga-Sutra* ("In the present moment is the teaching of yoga"), saying this is simple, but digging in is more difficult. After all, if dualistic perception is deeply embedded in our psychological makeup and our societies, where does one begin? For the yoga practitioner, one begins right here in this moment. The past emerges in the present in the form of bias and habits. Whether through the practices of *prāṇāyāma,* mantra, *āsana,* or ethics, the systems of yoga arise out of and point to the same thing: the present moment. Can we harmonize our attention, breathing, and the present circumstances right here and right now?

In the visualization of a breathing pattern or a meditation on sound, one dissolves the outer environment into the object of concentration, then the object of concentration collapses into an experience of being completely centered and still. This stillness is a point of nothingness, yet it is also everything. It is being with nobody there. It is being so fully present in an action (or nonaction) that you don't need to create a self. It's giving yourself so fully, you don't need a reward. When we live authentically, we are not simultaneously creating a sense of "I, me, or mine," we are simply being our selfless self.

In yoga posture practice we dissolve the technique of moving the body into pure feeling and then dissolve the mind into that deep experience of feeling. When in this state, that is all that is there. In chanting, as another example, we dissolve seed syllables into pure sound, and then sound into quiet, and then quiet into stillness, and then stillness becomes nothing other than a contented mind that is open and receptive, sharp and still. And just as we get entranced with stillness, we let that go as well. Dreams, visions, prophecies, hallucinations, hearing voices, or seeing colorful wheels or geometric patterns—we don't hold on to any of it. When in this natural state, anything can arise in mind, body, and heart, and there is no pushing or pulling, just arising and dissolving, one form becoming, in turn, another.

In these various techniques the essence of the practice is what the technique is

pointing toward rather than the technique itself. But we need technique to help us along, because the mind has a hard time becoming centered enough to relax into a state of stillness on its own. The practice is not the goal but the way for us to move through different stages of the path toward a more open and sincere way of being. This sincerity of being (*karuṇā*) is a result of a healthy yoga practice. If our practice is creating flexibility of the body without a corresponding flexibility of the heart, we need to redress the way we conceive of and engage in practice. If we develop a flexible body but retain a stiff mind, we are not practicing yoga.

This book is about how to cultivate a yoga practice, what constitutes a yoga practice, how to recognize and work with the different stages on the path, and how to keep the tradition of yoga a living tradition through committed practice and critical engagement. On a heart level, this book is about the cultivation of patience, honesty, nonviolence, wisdom, and the ability to meet life as it occurs from moment to moment without habitual forms of clinging. Whether you are just beginning your practice or you have studied in a particular system for a long while, you should be able to find here some suggestions and encouragement for deepening your practice.

There are two themes in this book: (1) the essence of yoga teaches us that all forms of clinging create suffering, and (2) a disciplined and appropriate practice leaves no stone unturned. A broad understanding of yoga theory integrated with specific practices takes the formal techniques of yoga to deeper levels but also brings yoga off the mat, out of the meditation hall, and into the tangled world of our interpersonal relationships, our habitual psychological holding patterns, and the complexity of ethical action. This book moves back and forth between these two themes—practice and letting go—by weaving together theory and responsive action.

Along with covering the primary theme of letting go of our attachments—especially to self-image—this book attempts to bridge the gap in contemporary yoga between practice and theory. My aim is to not only reconcile theory and practice but to explore how both theory and practice come alive when integrated into daily life. So, unlike much of the usual teaching methodology, this book focuses on words rather than postures. It offers suggestions rather than instructions, and interpretations based on tradition rather than appropriation or idealization. While within these pages, see if you can listen with your heart rather than your intellect.

We are used to processing what we usually call "theory" with the intellectual

mind. But when ideas in yoga are listened to with just the intellect, they remain at a distance from the heart, and in this way we can miss the essence and wisdom of this practice and its power to challenge and open up the heart. Yoga is about how we can take in teachings and put them into practice; how we can sit openly with mind and body, breath, and stillness, then let them spread out in the wide-open world of nature and other beings. Yoga opens us up to a transparent state of being where the world passes through us without obstacle.

Like the arising inhalation and the passing exhalation, every moment is in itself a moment of creation followed by one of dissolution. Like the rising and falling of the breath or the dawning and setting of the sun, this book follows that same rhythm. The first chapters begin with a description and definition of yoga and from there describe the various paths of practice. Like the top of an inhale or the trace of the sun across the morning, the first part of this book moves toward a description of the psychology and energetic aspects of yoga. After that there is a descent toward the exploration of the teachings of impermanence, emptiness, and death—all of which actually bring us into direct engagement with life. This cycle naturally completes itself, because contemplating impermanence and death connects us with the present moment, which is where yoga always begins.

As we've already explored a little, yoga begins with an honest meeting of our present experience, which means seeing as best we can all aspects of ourselves and our world, including what is most difficult or painful. The outer reflection of our created life does not always provide an accurate reading of the state of the inner life. Yoga unifies by bringing the outer and inner into greater relation.

How much suffering have we felt through our inability to tolerate and live in the midst of change? How much difficulty do we experience from our reactions to the interactivity of feelings, thoughts, movements in the body and memory? The sense of ourselves at an innermost level is entangled with our reactions to the gross and subtle movements in the mind and body. The mind and body belong to a moment-to-moment process, not to our clinging habits nor to the ways we want things to be or wish they were. Yoga is freedom from this satisfaction-dissatisfaction cycle bound up with the self-definition of what is "me" and "mine." The path through this ongoing cycle of habit begins in the present moment, which originates in our perceptual field of mind and body.

In the *Yoga-Sutra*, which truly is a textbook on yoga as a psychological practice, Patañjali initiates the path of yoga with two first steps: practice (*abhyāsa*) and letting go (*vairāgya*). From these spring the cultivation of more

wholesome intentions and actions of body, speech, and mind, and letting go of historical and ensnaring attitudes. All these practices are constants all along the path. Cultivating positive qualities and letting go of negative factors in our psychophysical makeup gives us a clear starting point for our practice, without which we risk getting lost in the futility of undirected movement. It is easy to engage in a language of freedom and impermanence or think that just completing a regimented sequence of yoga postures is going to free up our deepest holding patterns, but it is something else to feel impermanence, freedom, and deep kindness in our bones. We can only know a grounded, flexible, and free life when we commit to practice and cultivate the skill of letting go.

After several years of consistent practice, I found that a gap emerged between the theory I was studying and the posture technique, breathing, and meditation I was practicing, so I began asking questions. The first questions were broad questions about how texts related to one another and why certain practices, such as the contemporary yoga sequences commonly found in yoga studios, were not represented in ancient texts. From there the questions became more personal, and related to the absence of psychological understanding in yoga communities and the vanity that comes from a superficial practice. I realized that one might maintain a superficial practice even after many years. As I began questioning what I was practicing, I felt that everything I knew and all the practices I had been working on were slowly beginning to slip away. The questions led first to doubt and then to a state of not knowing why I was practicing or what practice actually was. I saw around me people accomplishing great feats of flexibility and wonderful posture practices, but I saw also that those practices did not guarantee a commensurate opening of the heart. Perfection in yoga poses did not guarantee psychological or spiritual insight.

What do we aspire to in practice? What motivates our practice? What is the reason for practice? Some say we practice for no reason, but human experience seems always constructed within the context of purpose or meaning. How does one live a good life? What is enlightenment? Is yoga just about physical accomplishment, and if not, why are the ethical and psychological underpinnings of yoga so underexamined? Does one have to finally hold their own heels in backbends or practice arm balances in full lotus to find the meaning, or is there some other test for the liberatory potential of practice?

2. Embracing Suffering

IN THE MEDIEVAL TEXT on yoga known as the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa*, Rama is asked by his father why he has a heavy heart and why he is having such a hard time in his mind and with his body. With low eyes and a sunken chest, Rama responds by saying,

> My heart has begun to question: what do people call happiness and can it be had in the ever-changing objects of this world? All beings in this world take birth only to die and die to be born. I do not perceive any meaning at all in these transient phenomena….Unrelated beings come together; the mind conjures up a relationship between them. Everything in this world is dependent on the mind and one's attitude. On examination, the mind is unreal, it cannot be found. But we are bewitched by it. This is suffering.[1]

A king, who is also present for the conversation between Rama and his father, responds first by saying that Rama's perception of his condition is the root of the problem.

> Rama's condition is not the result of delusion, the king continues, but is full of wisdom and points to enlightenment.[2]

When the sages, ministers, and community of the court hear this exchange, they stop their doings and become completely still. They hear in Rama's flaming words their own doubts, fears, and misunderstandings. The royal family, citizens, pets, caged birds, horses in the royal stables, and even the heavenly musicians are silenced by the way Rama gives expression to their deepest fears, hopes, and desires. In this story, we hear an essential question: how does one work with the inherent suffering of being human? Yoga not only begins in the present moment (*atha*) but begins also with the recognition of the suffering, stress, discontent, and dissatisfaction that characterizes much of our moment-to-moment experience.

The characteristics of suffering appear in the heart as poisons. Here is how

Pattabhi Jois describes it:

> In the yoga śāstra it is said that god dwells in our heart in the form of light, but this light is covered by six poisons: kāma, krodha, moha, lobha, mātsarya, and mada. These are desire, anger, delusion, greed, envy and sloth.[3]

Not only does Rama articulate a universal truth about human suffering, but the king responds in a surprising way. Rather than asking Rama to further explain his anguish and discontent, he describes Rama's problem as an error of perception. It is not that Rama is caught in delusion but rather that Rama is deluded about his own delusion. His suffering is not the problem, it's that he doesn't see that his suffering is the source of wisdom and the actual path to enlightenment. Rather than treating his anguish as something to be expelled, the king infers, anguish is a recognition that the path has opened. The king does not define enlightenment in this first chapter, nor does he recommend a series of techniques to follow to find freedom from torment. Instead he offers Rama a complete reversal, a counter perception that defines the path of yoga as an embrace of one's suffering. In doing this he uses complete acceptance as a starting point for practice.

In the same way that Pattabhi Jois describes the enemies of the heart as the factors that create suffering, he also points to the heart with his own breath as a means of saying that the path begins in the heart, the body, the mind. In the language of devotional *bhakti* yoga, it is said that the cure of the symptom begins with love. This is not personal love in the sense of a new-age sensitivity or empathic technique but rather the impersonal force of love that heals by extending itself to the most interrupted, broken, and ruined parts of ourselves.

I came to yoga practice because I was suffering. Like Rama, or many other well-known characters that populate Indian literature (I think also of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*), most practitioners come to yoga to deal with the myriad forms of upset, stress, and lack. We are often attracted to yoga because we are struggling with pain. We may notice our suffering and call it only the daily grind of work or a difficulty with relationships, stiff shoulders, or tight hamstrings. We may think of our pain as large or small, but either way some level of dissatisfaction brings us to yoga, whether we are conscious of it or not.

One of the key teachings of yoga, as described in the *Sāṇkhya Karika* of Ishvarakṛṣṇa, is that life is characterized by duḥkha, suffering. You find this

stated across many texts. It is one of the central tenets of Kṛṣṇa's teaching to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā.* It is stated in the king's comments to Rama in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa*, it is Patañjali's starting point in the *Yoga-Sutra* and the Buddha's first noble truth. In all these texts the statement returns: life is characterized by dissatisfaction and pervasive lack. We live in impermanent bodies, our relationships change over time, and we will all be separated from people and from places that we love. There's a tragic dimension that runs through life. Practice is opening to that tragic dimension of life until we can feel the pain of reality, the pain of others, and the pain of the world, without adding pain to pain. Maybe the worst suffering is when we don't know how to be with suffering.

It's interesting to contemplate how many times a day we try to escape our body. Unpleasant feeling tone gives rise to aversion. Can we harmonize with the raw sensation of aversion, or do we go for social media or alcohol or other intoxicants? What if we had a daily mantra where we reminded ourselves again and again not to do anything that makes us leave our body?

In order to remind yoga students why they are in class, I often tell them, "There is just enough suffering to get you in the door." Difficulty begets faith. Faith in yoga implies a sense of yearning. So, what are we yearning for? What do we seek to be free of? For many of us, the longing to practice yoga has to do with aspiring to a life free of habitual patterns of conditioning. If we seek any kind of transcendence, we are already looking for something we do not yet know. Faith is a movement beyond what we currently feel is constricting us, and in that sense faith is a yearning. At some level, we all yearn to overcome places in which there is constriction, lack, and discontent. So in essence, faith requires not a theological commitment but rather a practical interest in one's discontent and how to bring it to an end.

In this way, we do not need to dismiss our longing as a form of attachment but see it as an integral part of what keeps us going. Of course, longing can get mixed up with the projects of the ego, but even in this there is a wish to see through the limitations of the ego. We long to know the nature of things and to connect and be grounded in relationship with something larger than our ideas of ourselves. We are all in the end vulnerable and subject to the world. Humans know so much about so many things, but what do we really know when pressed with anguish or pain? What do we learn about our character when up against the truth of change, the truth of death, the truth of suffering?

The first yoga classes I ever attended consisted of little more than sitting still

and watching the cycles of the breath. The teacher instructed us to notice the breath and whatever physical and mental states were coming and going. I had a hard time sitting still for more than one breath cycle. By the time I reached the top of an inhalation, my mind was always on to something else. But eventually, I began to notice the ways the mind and body were deeply conditioned with patterns of reactivity. Before she had us move our bodies, the teacher required that we could sit still and notice the feeling of simple breathing and the mind's tendency to escape those simple sensations.

Too often, our first response to sense data is to think about it, and when caught in our thinking, we begin to withdraw into a representational reality constructed in our own mind. The philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in his treatise on the human condition that "All of human unhappiness is due to the inability to sit still in a room alone."[4]

Inextricably linked to the teaching of duḥkha is the way that suffering continues in cycles, like a wheel spinning out of balance. This turning of the wheel of duḥkha is called *saṁsāra.* Saṁsāra is a metaphor for meaninglessness. It refers to the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. But the concept of the cycle of birth and rebirth is not simply a carryover from Indian cultural attitudes about the possibility of future or past lives. Rather, it speaks to the birth, death, and rebirth of our sense of self from moment to moment. Each moment of experience, whether in stillness or in reactivity, sets up the pattern for the next consecutive moment, and our ability to skillfully meet every moment with open and undivided attention is possible to astonishing degrees. Every moment conditions the next.

While not an image of hell, per se, saṁsāra and duḥkha are thought to be one and the same. Suffering is a product of conditioned existence, of this wheel endlessly spinning. Yoga practice is about breaking free of the cyclic force of habitual activity and distorted mental and emotional forces that drive us to act in ways that maintain suffering.

Sometimes turning to the imaginative and mythical tales helps us better understand the workings of the mind. Carl Jung reminds us that "mythology is where the psyche 'was' before psychology made it an object of investigation."[5]

In one tale from the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa*, Sikhidhavaja asks Kumbha what the nature of the mind is so that he can finally put it to rest. "Tell me the exact nature of the mind," Sikhidhavaja asks, "then I can know how to abandon its habits so that they do not arise again and again."

Kumbha responds by saying that all conditioned patterns (saṁsāra) exist in the mind and body as *vāsanā*s (memories, subtle impressions of the past, conditioning). "In fact," he says, "the subtle impressions from the past and the mind itself are synonymous." Most mind states are made of habits, and those very habits add up to what we call "a life," though such an existence is superficial and alienating. Yoga technology is a means of becoming free of our mind's habitual grasping and contractions.

"How does one let go of the repetition of past experience?" asks Sikhidhavaja, wondering if there is a way beyond self-reference and its resulting discontent. "The end of relating to each experience through the filter of saṁsāra," Kumbha says, "occurs when you can uproot the tree whose seed is the 'I'-maker, deep in the heart with all its branches, fruits and leaves. Leave the mechanism of the 'I'-maker alone, and just rest in the space in the heart."[6]

The heart, as a location of mind and body, is the dwelling place of the five kleṣas. The most deeply conditioned of the kleṣas is asmitā, the story of self we create based on our conditioned likes and dislikes. The aim of practice is to bring duḥkha to an end by facing saṁsāra in order to uproot the egoist tendencies of the mind. Saṁsāra is literally a going around in circles. Saṁsāra is descriptive of a life of frustration where we expend a great deal of energy but live lives that keep taking us back into states of suffering. Saṁsāra is the sense of being caught in a wheel that spins and spins, yet we can't find our way out of the cycle.

When I began studying yoga postures seriously, I would practice all morning and work at a home for senior citizens in the afternoon. Some of the residents were quite articulate and bright, and there was one man named Walter whom I found especially gentle and quiet. I would sit with him under the leaded glass windows of the greenhouse, with its slate walls and mossy brick pathways, and ask him questions about Toronto and its early architecture. One day, while discussing the sad fate of some of the city's historical buildings, he made a comment about the way human and physical architecture are both subject to decay. Then he said something especially poignant: "When I think of my life as a young boy, at three or thirty, I had some of the same thoughts as when I was twelve or twenty. Now, in my late nineties, I am not sure if much has changed. I have painted and written poetry, traveled throughout Europe, and made a fair amount of money. I have two grown children, and I've loved my wife consistently. Despite all this I am not sure if my questions about life have been answered at all, nor if I have changed much. My neurotic self is still just as

neurotic, and my anxieties are exactly the same. It's as if nothing has changed."

This kind of reflection is not uncommon, but I think it strikes to the heart of what is meant by the term *saṁsāra*. Our psychological and physical patterns, as ingrained and self-perpetuating matrices, keep us bound to the wheel of saṁsāra, to the turning wheel of conditioned existence. There are many ways to describe this feeling, and those who work with the workings of the mind have continually been compelled to address this churning. Carl Jung often described suffering as a neurotic compulsion. He once said that "compulsion is the great mystery of human life—an involuntary motive force in the mind and body that can range all the way from mild disinterest to possession by a diabolical energy."[7] Sigmund Freud called the same activity the "compulsion to repeat," a seemingly universal tendency in the psyche to be continually caught up by something outside of awareness.[8] Twelve-step philosophy states that the "definition of insanity is repeating the same behavior and expecting different results." We are unconscious of most of the patterns we repeat. Our unconscious habits are by definition, outside of our awareness. They are things inherited or developed early in life. Insofar as we are caught up in cycles and bundles of habit, we are often imitators and copiers of our past selves.

The teaching of karma tells us that in every moment, consciously or unconsciously, we are taking actions, however minute, that create our experience of future moments. The concept is also that our actions have an effect. We put something into each moment as we dialogue with it and participate in it. In doing so we construct the kind of experiences we have in this and future moments. If we are to grow, change, wake up, or heal in any way and to any degree, such transformation is only possible through embracing with awareness this very moment, even if it is a moment of discomfort, pain, or discontent.

So, what is the path that helps us off of this wheel or out of the circle? What is the path of yoga?

3. *Mārga*

ESTABLISHING THE PATH

> Yoga…has by now become a comfortable English word, though in its more physical sense as physical or Hatha Yoga. In the Gītā, it has a wide range of meanings: path, practice, discipline, and meditation, among others. Restricting it to "discipline" alone would be an impoverishment.
>
> —Stephen Mitchell, Introduction to the *Bhagavad Gītā*

Yoga as a path is the way out of our present conditioning and the way toward freedom from habitually ensnaring conditions—a practice and philosophy described in widely diverse ways in texts such as the early Vedas, the *Yoga-Sutra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā.*

Freedom only has impact if we understand it as liberation from an unfree condition. Freedom is always "freedom *from.*" Enlightenment is a movement in which we free ourselves from what obstructs and entraps us.

What constitutes the path of yoga? First, there is a sense that it is truly a path. The Sanskrit term for "path" is *mārga,* which can refer to a trail, road, or sense of direction. The root *marg* means "to seek" or "to strive," linked also to the verbal root *mrj,* meaning "to pursue a particular direction." Likewise, a spiritual path offers us a sense of direction. A path gives us something to follow. Just like seeing cleared limbs and worn earth in a dense forest, in the spiritual life, we gain an intuitive sense when we're on the path that others have gone before. Even if you don't know what spiritual path you are on, you can certainly feel when you've strayed from a beneficial route.

A path denotes that others have traveled before us. In the Aṣṭān?ga Vinyasa system of Pattabhi Jois and the method of posture sequencing taught by B. K. S. Iyengar, one finds an almost identical map of sequences. They were both taught by Kṛṣṇamacharya, who was taught this sequence by Ramamohan Brahmacari in a cave in Tibet. Both Pattabhi Jois and Iyengar also saw diagrams of posture

sequences illustrated in a now-lost text called the *Yoga Koruntha,* reported to have been housed in a library in Calcutta. Simply put in terms of practice technique, a path is created by tradition and the testing and refinement of tradition as it comes alive in the present experience of a practitioner.

Another feature of a path is that there are signs, markers, and instructions that help orient us in the landscape. There are meditation techniques, ethics, and alignment principles that help guide us, depending on where we are, but these are only tools to use so that we can wake up to the landscape itself. Eventually we realize that the tools are only there to help us see that landscape and practitioner are nothing other than relative categories and that the path of yoga moves beyond such categories as it ripens. We know from traversing the physical world that walking up a slope, or down a steep hill, or getting across a river all require different sorts of movements. Likewise, the lifestyle of a householder, a monk, a teenager, a single person, or even a man or a woman may differ, requiring different kinds of instruction from a teacher and different approaches from the student.

When our son was born, my daily routine of three hours of early-morning āsana practice had to change. Not only did I not sleep for almost a year, there was an increased sensitivity to what others needed. Parenting became a matter of meeting necessity. If I had continued to cling to my previous form of practice, there would have been suffering for myself and my family. After many nights without sleep I did not have the same stamina to practice yoga postures I had before his birth. So, it's important to find the path that is appropriate to the practitioner in the present. A path is a mode of being in the world that is practical and accessible yet challenges habitual grooves of comfort. The heart and body always seek a path out of discontent, but the mind always puts up some resistance. The mind does not like to be moved from its habits. Freud described the challenge of following the path of psychotherapy in a similar way when he wrote that "resistance follows every step of the way."[1] Nevertheless, it is important to remember that paying attention to what is here—the workings of the mind with its categories, judgments, and ideas about things—is the very path itself, the route and even the means.

The path of yoga is concerned with inner freedom, and there are many ways and methods of practice within the various schools of yoga. There are many different approaches to practice, sometimes even within each school, but the approach that I am distilling here has to do with freedom from the suffering

inherent in saṁsāra, a practice that begins in the body, breath, and mind, and forms the basic axiom of yoga. Although there seem to be two worlds—the life of everyday chores and the disciplined dedication to formal practice—the two are not separate at all. In fact, these two sides of the yogi's life intertwine to become the very path itself, with no aspect of life separate from yoga, and yoga not separate from any thought, action, or deed. Our whole life gets rolled into practice. Waking up is not an improvement of reality but rather direct contact with it.

Yoga is the practice of finding within ourselves freedom from the sense of being caught in impermanent and limited situations. In some respects, we can't escape those conditions, but we can be less invested in them. Freedom is living in such a way that we are not hemmed in or entangled in the situations we encounter. We learn to preserve an inner psychological stillness of nonreactivity and ethical action, which is equivalent to freedom.

Symptoms of conditioning are not only reflections of a world out of balance but are the means by which we see the world. Jealousy, for example, is not just a spontaneous reaction to things that happen to us but a habit of perception that colors what we see and how we act. The poisons of jealousy or greed or hatred then are not just symptoms that affect how we feel, rather they are on a deeper level modes through which we filter experience. These feelings don't just move through us but can take hold and become dominant lenses through which we view reality. The light by which the world reflects in and through us is always modified by our conditioning, influencing not just what we perceive but also how we perceive.

Enlightenment (*mokṣa*) is here and now. It occurs when we free ourselves from ego clinging and become more transparent, letting go of the armoring or protection that we think of as ourselves, dissolving separation with the greater world. This means opening up to our own suffering as well as to the discontent in the world around us. When we get to that point, our spiritual practice rises to the level of asking questions—questions like: How can I be so concerned with my own spiritual practice when there is so much suffering in the world? How can we live a life that can optimally benefit others? The point of this process is recognizing the self out of balance in a world out of balance, and that we practice to harmonize both, because they are not, as we once thought, separate. By upsetting the centrality of "me," we open up to the world at large, which means that the internal and external, inner and outer, me and you, become conceptual designations only, not the reality of felt experience, which is not two but one.

The path of yoga helps us find an authentic and meaningful response to having been born and having to die. We know that opening up to these truths can be terrifying, but the process can also offer amazing promise. The path of yoga offers a freedom from the struggle of trying to create permanence in an ever-changing existence. In contrast with the beliefs and habits we cling to that help us feel secure and are somewhat unchanging, yoga practice opens us to the reality of being in an ever-changing flow of conditions arising and passing away. It helps us open to the essential boundless nature of reality.

By beginning with body, mind, and breath as they are experienced in the present moment, yoga practice deals with the common hypnotic state of suffering and a conditioned existence in which we find ourselves spinning. Yoga addresses the unconscious physical and psychological holding patterns that become chronic aspects of ourselves. Once we begin to see the way our conditions are constructed, we begin taking them apart until the very last conditional pattern is revealed: clinging to the notions of “I, me, and mine.” When we find freedom from the captive consequences of “me” and “mine,” we no longer experience reality as an isolated self. Then we become not only better able to relate to our conditioned existence but also more engaged in the interconnected world of relationships and thus the complex and heartfelt domain of action, compassion, and ethical responsibility.

4. Embodying the Path

The one light appears in diverse forms.
—*ATHARVA-VEDA*

FOR YOGA TO CONTINUE as a living tradition, it is important to study, practice, and continually wrestle with the basic teachings offered by teachers and texts. Without committed practice and critical engagement with the tradition, yoga becomes something of only antiquarian interest. The poet Czeslaw Milosz asks, "What good is poetry if it cannot save nations or people?"[1] The same question should be put to yoga.

When we accept without question ideas taught within the different yoga traditions as ultimate truths, the practice becomes dogmatic and oppressive. But when there is a practitioner, like Rama in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa* or Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā,* who asks, "What do these elite practices have to do with my suffering and my life in the face of death? What is this life that I find myself in?" yoga opens afresh. For the student who approaches practice and teachings with a receptive and critical mind, practice and awakening become less to do with ideological or orthodox understanding and more to do with a response in the here and now to the great questions of life. Yoga is not about conforming to other people's definitions of practice but simply an authentic response to the questions presented by our life, our path. If yoga points at the truth of existence, that very existence must be available to us in every moment, not as a new belief system or a utopia to arrive at in a future life, but something we can touch, maintain, and discover for ourselves. "Better to do one's own work dutifully than to do another's well," Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna in the final chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā.*

One of the last teachings on yoga in the *Bhagavad Gītā,* much like the initial teachings of *abhyāsa* (practice) and *vairāgya* (letting go) in the *Yoga-Sutra,* is the injunction to continually test out the field between theory and practice.[2] This is vital because without this exchange, we are practicing someone else's ideas or the teachings from another culture without genuinely wresting with those ideas ourselves. For yoga to be a living tradition, we need to integrate committed

practice with a teacher alongside critical engagement with the core axioms of the particular yoga system we are studying so that the teachings come alive in this culture, in this time, in this human experience. This concept was articulated beautifully by Jorge Luis Borges when he wrote,

> Everything happens for the first time,
> But in that way, it is eternal.
> Whoever lights a match in the dark is inventing fire.
> Whoever goes down to a river goes down to the Ganges.
> Whoever reads my words is inventing them.[3]

Yoga is timeless. This does not mean it is eternal or ephemeral, but simply available, always, in each unfolding moment, when we settle into the essence of who we are. The great questions of life and death are settled in the stillness of the mind and the direct actions of a self unfettered by itself. A seeming paradox at first, the yoga practitioner is nothing other than the vast range of the universe. When we practice, the central axis of one's own body becomes the Ganges. We discover the essence of the body to be nothing other than the great rivers of the earth, the vast sky, and the winds of the breath. And regardless of the conditions in which we find ourselves—depressed, flowing, polluted, clear, transparent, slow, or thick as mud—we practice.

Lowering Your Center of Gravity

The practice of yoga postures, what is commonly referred to as Hatha Yoga, belongs within the domain of Tantra Yoga. The term *tantra* is a combination of two roots: *tan* (to loom, warp, or do something in precise detail) and *tra* (to protect). Tantra begins with noticing the breath and its energetic aspects in the center of the body in great detail. What at first seems like the obvious rhythm of the breath, for example, opens up to show us the subtle winds that make up the breath, the impermanent nature of all our thoughts and feelings, and the inherent unity between the breath and the great vibration that is all living reality. This precision of attention interrupts our common mental distractions, the root causes of duḥkha.

While there are many misconceptions about tantra as a sexual practice or an esoteric model of visualization, and while some forms of tantra do include such

practices, the wider sense of the term is the study of the energetic relationship of mind and body in order to shift the mind out of its distracted habits into a deeper relationship with the basic constituents of nature. As we begin working with mind and body, we become acutely aware of energetic shifts in the body, whether in the feelings, temperature, nervous system, or breathing. Learning how to work with the energies of mind and body is the core practice of tantra. Tantra is psychological in essence because we have to learn to let go of the momentum of distracted and reactive mental habits in order to feel and move with energetic changes in the body. The body is studied and felt, sculpted and investigated, until it becomes treated as a microcosm of the greater universe. The study of reality begins with the body, because there is no perceived world independent of mind and body.

In Hatha Yoga, the center of the body is the base of the pelvic diaphragm. Like a wheel (*chakra*) or circle, the pelvic diaphragm floats above and is stretched between the dense corners of the pelvis: two sitting bones, the pubic bone, and the coccyx. Like looking down into the base of a flowerpot, the internal symmetry of the pelvic floor is circular with an empty center hollowed above the perineum. At the end of an exhale, a contraction occurs behind the abdominal well that ends in the center of the pelvic floor. This is called *mūla bandha* (the rooting bond), in which the breath creates tone in the pelvic floor and the mind is present enough to experience the action. There are two key points here: (1) that the breath cycle is organized to complete the exhale in its entirety, and (2) that one's awareness is focused and steady enough to be present at the end of the out-breath. This is but one example of the yoking of mind, breath, and body. Tantra is the science of paying attention, and the basic practices of attention begin in the body via the breath. And as in many yoga practices, physical technique and psychology cannot be separated.

The center of the pelvic floor is also the center of gravity for a human being. In yoga, we are always moving toward the center of things: whether thoughts, feelings, sensations, or breath cycles. All movement is initiated from the center of the pelvic floor, and the breath as an energetic pattern completes itself in a pause at mūla bandha and begins again where it ends. The death and rebirth of the breath cycle in physical form is felt most acutely in the pelvic diaphragm as we come in direct contact with the arising, spreading, and eventual contraction and disbanding of each movement as felt in the stream of each breath. We pay attention to the pelvic diaphragm in breathing practices and yoga postures not only because it challenges our ability to stay present while doing one action but

also because this area is the center of the human body, and a micro-cosmic window into the center of reality.

In the center of the human body we find the center of all things, because when breath, mind, and body come together in an instant of experience, reality unfolds. Reality unfolds when the mind can stay completely present in a breath cycle, especially at the completion of an exhale. The exhale completes itself in the pelvic floor, the center of gravity, the resting place of the mind. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* describes this clearly:

> Just as a bird tied by a string, after flying in various directions without finding a resting-place elsewhere settles down (at last) at the place where it is bound, so also the mind, my dear, after flying in various directions without finding a resting-place elsewhere, settles down in breath, for the mind, my dear, is bound to breath.[4]

Yoga psychology sees the mind and breath as bound together in the frame of the human body. There is no mind without breath, no stillness in the body without stillness in the mind, and no stillness in the mind without settled breath.

Mūla bandha, much like yoga itself, is not something you do but rather something that occurs spontaneously when you are present with the completion of an exhalation. When the breath naturally comes to completion, there is a feeling of toning and drawing up in the center of the pelvic region just above the perineum. Once the pelvic diaphragm tones, as the out-breath turns around and becomes an in-breath, the center of the floor curls up and lifts toward the roof of the mouth, turning from concave into a convex apex. This was discovered by yogis to be a perfect object of meditation, because it requires concentration, excellent breathing, steadiness in the nerves, patience, and interest in the body and mind in this very moment. This same truth can be discovered by all of us when we focus our attention in one place for long enough. Mūla bandha is a spontaneous gesture in the center of the human body that occurs when the breath cycle is allowed to complete itself without the interference of the mind. Hatha Yoga is the cultivation of careful and precise observation via imagination and feeling, and forms the basis of later psychological techniques in meditation practice. Treating our yoga postures and breathing practices as meditation techniques opens up deeper and deeper feeling pathways, and it is through those very pathways that the world moves through us.

We pay attention, even when nothing is happening. And after some time, we will find there is something in that seeming nothing. "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four," writes the composer John Cage. "If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all."[5] Mūla bandha is a meditation technique that uses the energetic movements in the body, via the breath cycle, as a neutral anchor point for the mind.

As we slow down and investigate our experience from moment to moment, we are, in essence, studying the way we organize and construct experience. Slowing down gives us an opportunity to get to know what we are investigating, rather than just falling into the usual habit of layering our theories over everything we encounter. Learning the techniques of mūla bandha teaches us to be present with the feelings, thoughts, emotions, and breath cycles occurring right at the center of human experience.

The word *guru* comes over to English as "gravity." *Guru* denotes a center of gravity. The root *gu* stands for darkness; *ru* for its removal. The guru, or the teacher, then is one who sheds light in the darkness of avidyā. The guru is one who understands the law of gravity and other basic laws of the universe, including the law of impermanence and the truth of duḥkha. Although the guru is sometimes embodied in an external person or entity, it is always actually your own center of gravity. The manifestation of these teachings is ultimately experienced within one's own body and mind. When your heart opens up, your internal center of gravity is revealed. Connecting with one's center of gravity is the embodiment of stillness.

One of the most radical precepts of yoga is that the elements that make up the universe at large are the same as those at work in each individual being. Watching the breath reverse its course at the bottom of an exhalation cuts into the center of reality itself if our attention is totally focused. "What's here is everywhere," says the narrator of the epic *Mahābhārata,* "and what isn't here is nowhere."[6] The way we process sensory data that arrive through our sense organs and mind demonstrates how we organize our experience of the cosmos. Watching the breath can be like watching the birth-and-death cycle of the universe. Everything is actually right here with us in each moment of perception, organization, and experience.

This is significant for our practice in that, as we construct our experience from moment to moment, so too do we construct our suffering. Our experience of suffering or dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*) always occurs in the present moment. But

this also means that we don't leave the present moment in order to work with suffering. Rather what we do is focus directly on the processing of present experience, because that is where our crucial troubles play themselves out. We stop looking outside of ourselves for the causes of suffering. We stop waiting in vain for the world to change so that we can finally feel peace. Instead, we begin to see that duḥkha is nothing other than present reality multiplied by resistance.

This means we don't necessarily need to look to the past for explanations, or worry about repeating addictive patterns in the future. This can be a difficult approach for the western mind to grasp. But this is so because the past is encoded in the present. Therefore, we need only to stay with what is arising right now and investigate it without coming out of it.

The word *yoga* denotes union. This implies that yoga is the cultivation of no-separation, a space where we can be in something with clarity without separating from it. Or to describe it in another way, through yoga we come to see that there is nothing to cultivate, because underneath distraction and aversion, everything is always already joined.

Right here and right now is where everything important is happening. This is where we pay attention. The breath and the body are always present, so we breathe our circumstances. From there we develop the skills necessary to deal with difficulty, rather than reinforcing habits of aversion. This helps us use the mind efficiently—as a locator of the proper frame of reference. And we need proper qualities of mind to see clearly and to feel what is there to be felt before letting it pass on. In this process we gain wisdom. The ability to separate the act from its object helps us become more sensitive to the act before it becomes overwhelming. When we can observe the coming and going of chronic pain, for example, we can learn how to be with it, how to bear it, how to breathe as it arises and passes away. This is the powerful skill of being able to see something arising, changing, and passing away without getting personally caught up in it.

With chronic or any other kind of pain, including emotional pain, we sometimes use so much energy and effort trying to escape it that we actually increase the original pain. Often, when we feel pain in the body we react to it with aversion, stories, memories, association, and conceptualizations. This cycle can happen so fast that it is almost impossible to notice. We come to think of pain and our reaction to it as one and the same. But what yoga asks us to do and gives us tools to do is slow down the way we perceive our experience so that we can see more clearly.

Participating in Each Moment

Each time we run away from our experience, we plant seeds of repetition. This means that the next time an event occurs that seems similar to a past event, we meet that experience with the conditioned response systems we have constructed and reinforced in the mind, body, and nervous system. We create feedback loops in the *saṁskāra*s (psychophysical grooves) and in the *nadi*s (feeling and feedback pathways) that keep us running away from the experience, both pleasurable and painful.

The question is then, is there a way to notice sensation when it arises and ride it out to its dissolution? This is what we are examining through yoga. If one can practice with curiosity, rather than reactivity, then one can become familiar enough with one's own patterns to get under them before they take over. Through practice we can eliminate all forms of reaction. When there is no reaction, we are free to take action. In other words, when reactive patterns are suspended or let go of altogether, we can respond in any given situation without reaction to that situation.

Bound up in all this is an important distinction between reaction and response. They are not the same. The question is: how are they different? Most of us, most of the time, are busy reacting, that is, springing into our own habits and mental games the moment we encounter anything new. Response, on the other hand, refers to a spontaneous way of being in which we can accept and recognize what is actually occurring and take an appropriate action. Since we are usually so reactive, it is hard to first recognize what is actually occurring. Our perception is clouded with preference. Once we can recognize what is happening in a moment of experience, we can accept it and allow it to unfold without trying to escape. When we can accept something, we can investigate it in depth and release our instinctive movements toward identifying with the content of experience. When we respond rather than react, pain is pain, a feeling is a feeling, and things are a little simpler, as they are simply aspects of nature, coming, transforming, and passing on.

In the course of paying close attention to the breath, mind, and body, we discover that the experience of the present moment consists of results from past and present actions. By paying attention we find karma alive in ourselves. The law of karma is simply that volitional action always has an effect. Previous experience influences present experience, and what we do in the present

influences the way we experience the future. This means karma operates in feedback loops. The present moment is shaped by both past and present actions. Present action shapes not only the future but also the present. There is nothing that separates who we are from all that comes to be. Our actions and intentions all contribute to how things are. In short, our dispositions are implicated in everything we do. Our experience is filtered through our preconditioned sense organs and mind. In a sense, we are filters, unique and unrepeatable synthesizers of life. Thus our task is to let our experience pass through us in a way that does not negatively contribute to the activity of the world. Don't make things worse!

Usually *karma* is translated into English as "fate." But this is a misunderstanding. The word *vipāka* refers to the effect of an action. The word *karma,* however, refers to both volitional action and its effects. "Wherever there is fire," Kṛṣṇa says in the *Bhagavad Gītā,* "there is smoke."[7] Our actions are always followed by residue.

No thing that we can experience exists independent of our intentions and actions—no substance, no answer, no final separation between who we are, what we do, and the deep questions life presents us. Our actions have consequences. Causality in terms of yoga means that when we see suffering and greed, envy and fear, aggression and rigidity in the world around us and decide we do not want to contribute to these states, then we must make our minds, hearts, and bodies become filters for those states. We practice so that we may clear those potentials.

I meditate on causality so that I can work with my own capacity for greed, violence, or intolerance, and in that way my whole being becomes a filter for the culture's tendencies toward these states of being. It is as though by practicing what seems like an internal practice, we make a form of social action. Examining causality allows us to see that our internal work of meditation flows out into the world around us. The way it flows depends on how we participate in each moment. When we understand causality we begin to see the yoga of relation, that is, we must seek truth and change within ourselves; we cannot find it outside.

The line between meditation practice and day-to-day life is arbitrary, and this line becomes thinner as practice deepens. The challenge is to take the benefits of meditation into the mundane activities of our lives.

No matter what aspect of the path first calls you, the practice is ultimately one for waking up. It is not about doctrine or theology or self-improvement. Any

reduction in suffering is worthwhile, even if it's simply coming to a yoga class and feeling our way into stillness or becoming aware perhaps just once during the day of our breathing. But the larger task is awakening to causality—learning how our actions always have consequences. One of the more significant insights I've had in my own practice over the years is that I've become much more aware of my intentions. Looking at my mind, day in and day out, from a place of stillness, has been instrumental in teaching me how I reinforce internalized patterns of suffering and how I can use awareness to make those constricted and chronic patterns more workable. Because I've struggled with depression since I was young, I've had no shortage of emotional weather patterns to contend with. Having a daily practice is key.

The practice of noticing the difference between pure awareness (*puruṣa*) and the fluctuating objects of consciousness is about allowing space in the heart, mind, and body so that we depart from habitual mental constructs and psychological delusions, not from thinking altogether but from conceiving in conceited and predisposed ways.

Yoga works against our most problematic conception of duality. It undoes the belief that we are truly separate from the world. Awakening is the ongoing process of lifting veils in the mind that separate things. It is a process of dissolving our sense of oppositions, like self and other. When we take wholesome action, and understand the habits that inform unwholesome action, we shift the heart into such a natural state of openness that we no longer see existence in the universe as separate from the self. Enlightenment is becoming who we really are, free to take action without feeling as though "my" actions benefit the "other." So in this way it would be clearer to say "enlightening action." Nobody gets enlightened. Instead we are continually waking up. We don't practice for a future enlightenment; we practice as an expression of our innate awareness. When we find that our self is bound up in what is greater than the self, habits die away. Without the passing away of habit, the yoked nature of the present moment remains concealed. Irvin Yalom makes the point in psychological language:

> To live in the present above time is to have no future, and to have no future is to accept death—yet this man cannot do. He cannot accept death and therefore neither can he live in the Now; and not living in the Now, he lives not at all.[8]

"Death" in this case is the death of habit—the ongoing letting go of the

thoughts that keep us "concealed and wrapped" in our self-centered versions of reality. Any creation of a separate self is a defense against letting go, and it gives rise to the six poisons of duḥkha, the six enemies in the heart.

5. The Eight Limbs

WE WESTERN PRACTITIONERS (I cannot speak for non-Western practitioners) have come to realize, somewhat reluctantly, that spiritual practice has not eliminated some of our basic psychological ills, including deep anxiety, fear, and neurosis. This is hard to admit. Most of us came to practice, and continue to practice, because we believe in the liberation promised by texts, teachers, and the sensations of the practice itself. But as we go on, many of us have found that the practice can leave many things untouched. We can feel disenchanted and wonder: How is it that we can develop strong and flexible posture practices, deep states of meditation, or advanced prāṇāyāma techniques, yet still feel that many of our deep-seated habits and thoughts have gone untouched?

Many practitioners report that periods of deep practice are sometimes followed by feelings of confusion, depression, or anxiety. Returning from workshops or retreats, practitioners have to face the reality of relational existence. For most of us, it is the world of relationship that brings up our deepest holding patterns. That being the case, the first limb of yoga practice is the clarifying work of attending to the push of habit and the pull of relationships.

As our yoga practice matures, we find ourselves less accompanied by self-reference, and in place of self-interest is a new kind of movement that's in tune with the world. The practice of waking up the mind and body and the practice of stilling mind and body go hand in hand in what is referred to as the royal (*rāja*) path of yoga, described by Patañjali as the eight-limbed path. This path, known as Aṣṭān?ga yoga (*aṣ*—"eight," *ṭāṇga*—"limbs"), involves the simultaneous practice of eight limbs, or branches.

We cannot enjoy the fruits of yoga if we fixate on one aspect, such as the physical, while ignoring the others. Without seriously attending to the first limb of the path, the *yama*s (restraints), our practice may bypass important developmental activities crucial to our psychological growth, including cultivating relationships with diverse people and learning how to navigate relational existence in general. If we start our practice without this clearing work, we may find ourselves on the path but lost, as we have missed vital foundational teachings. Sincere and eccentric relationships demand that we be authentic and present-

centered. Virginia Woolf described this state succinctly in her diary entry of June 22, 1940, when she wrote, “More to the point and less composed.”[1] That is what we must find for ourselves.

Pattabhi Jois referred to poisons prior to teaching about the kleṣas. All the poisons have at their root self-centeredness. These stand in the way of every yoga practice, and we must do some work facing them and clearing them up as much as possible if we want to progress on the path. Envy, anger, jealousy, greed, and scattered desire all fortify our sense of self. But they also all offer unsatisfying and ultimately untenable solutions to the tasks of life.

What the yamas do is keep these diverse and conflicting impulses in check and balanced. Desire, for example, is a necessary feeling for anyone who pursues a spiritual path, but it’s the act of seeing through desire by holding it in check that ultimately transforms our relationship to it and to other beings. Therefore, we must contend with desire, or other sensations, restraining them without violence.

If we do not work to clarify our thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, we wind up moving through the world enclosed in an isolated bubble that leaves in its wake alienation, harm, and dissatisfaction. We have a moral obligation to the entire ecological web of existence to wake up from self-pity, self-promotion, and self-centeredness in order to attend to our place in the world with sensitivity and wisdom.

The eight limbs are as follows:

1. *Yamas* (external restraints): the clarification of one’s relationship to the world of people and objects. There are five practices associated with this limb:

   Ahiṁsā (not harming, nonviolence)

   Satya (honesty, being truthful)

   Asteya (not taking what is not freely given, not stealing)

   Brahmacharya (wise use of energy, including sexual energy)

   Aparigraha (not being acquisitive, not accumulating what is not essential)

2. *Niyamas* (internal restraints): personal principles governing the cultivation of insight.

   Śauca (purification)

   Santoṣa (contentment)

   Tapas (discipline, patience)

   Svādhyāya (self-study, contemplation)

Īśvara-praṇidhānā (devotion, dedication to the ideal of pure awareness)

3. *Āsana* (posture): cultivation of profound physical and psychological steadiness and ease in mind, breath, and body.
4. *Prāṇāyāma* (breath and energetic regulation): sustained observation and relaxation of all aspects of breathing, bringing about a natural refinement of the mind-body process through the stilling of the respiratory process.
5. *Pratyāhāra* (withdrawing of the senses): a naturally occurring uncoupling of sense organs and sense objects as awareness interiorizes.
6. *Dhāraṇā* (concentration meditation): locking awareness on a single object (such as sound, breath, sensations in the body) until the field of awareness becomes singular and focused.
7. *Dhyāna* (absorption): concentration deepens to the point where subject and object dissolve.
8. *Samādhi* (integration): the sustained experience of concentration, in which there is a complete integration of subject and object, revealing pure awareness as the nondual substratum of reality; no-separation.

Some teachers describe the first four limbs as external and the last four limbs as internal. Others say that you practice the first four limbs with sheer will and then the last four limbs occur spontaneously. However, this is not the traditional approach to the eight limbs, nor what Patañjali intended. A balanced practice is the simultaneous investigation of all eight limbs, as each limb complements every other. Yoga teacher and writer Richard Freeman describes the eight limbs as a complete practice,

> which is evolving into deep and spontaneous meditation and complete liberation. The variety of limbs guarantees that the awareness operates in all spheres of one's life, so that no distortion, perversion or fantasy will attempt to usurp the solid ground of real Yogic insight. In many of the yoga Upaniṣads the eight limbs are further expanded into fifteen. The advantage of considering the path of yoga to have many aspects is that one is encouraged not to neglect the moral, the ethical, the interpersonal, the physiological, the esoteric and the meditative aspects of practice. The term Aṣṭāṅga implies both simultaneous realization of all these interrelated aspects of practice and a logical step-by-step progression where one limb prepares one to truly practice the next one.[2]

In contemporary yoga practices we often jump into the third limb, of āsana, and end up with a fragmented and imbalanced yoga practice, because it has no roots. The rooting of a practice occurs when one starts at the beginning with the ethical codes that Patañjali outlines as the stepping-stones to further practices. Too often, practitioners of Hatha Yoga have a partial view of practice, because the cornerstone of the path, the yamas, is bypassed or avoided altogether.

The root problems in our world—violence, greed, anger, inflexibility, intolerance—are at their core problems of perception and consciousness. In terms of perception, our attitudes, behaviors, and actions are conditioned by our culture, and as such the culture is by and large blind to these problems. It is difficult to address them using the tools the culture provides. In terms of consciousness, there seems to be a fundamental existential dislocation, one that has both cognitive and ethical dimensions. That is, individual and collective duḥkha both stem from a disoriented understanding of reality, and a distortion of what we are actually experiencing.

Because our root problems have to do with perception and consciousness, any viable solution must be framed in terms of a transformation. Addressing these problems requires an attempt to get a more accurate grasp of the human situation in its fullness and complexity. It requires a turning of the mind and heart in a new direction, a direction commensurate with the new understanding, one that brings light and peace rather than strife and distress. This begins with the cultivation of a practice rooted in human and ecological relationship rather than individual success or achievement. Yoga is a practice of horizontal transcendence (you and me in relation to each other) rather than vertical transcendence (my practice for my own freedom).

The foundation of the spiritual path of yoga is ethics. Ethics forms the base, because as a set of suggestions for how to live, it goes right to the heart of our actions of body, speech, and mind. The ethical principles of nonharming, truthfulness, the wise use of sexual energy, not stealing, and nonacquisitiveness refer to the honest examination and transformation of our physical actions and interpersonal relations. These limbs apply not only to the way we act in external relationships; they also apply to our internal states as well.

If our yoga practice went no further than the first limb—ethics-based restraints—we would still experience great benefit, as would those around us. Ethical principles keep us kind, sensitive, and balanced in our internal states as well as in our response to the external; the yamas place us over and over again squarely in

community, even in the community of characters and energies that move through our internal awareness. They keep us grounded in the world of relationship, which includes other people, animals, the environment, the elements, and even one's internal states of mind and body.

The yamas also help keep the mind and the energetic flow of the body directed. They help us maintain our equilibrium while existing in and of the world. This also helps us study our own psychology, since we watch closely our intentions when taking any given action. Having the yamas as guides allows us to see clearly the nature of our intentions so that we can monitor our volitional actions and engage appropriately with whatever circumstance we find ourselves in.

The yamas also remind us that the purpose of yoga is to show how experience can be made a source of creative action. They reveal how sometimes the most negative characteristics of one's personality are actually stronger sources of wisdom than what we consider our positive aspects. The negative, or what we call negative, aspects of ourselves do the work of revealing details and encumbrances that we've struggled with most, know most intimately, and have learned how to wrestle, restrain, and transform.

I have, in my own life, reflected on the power of rules or restraints to teach and reveal. But I am also conscious of the barriers we often put between the rules and present lived experience. In addition to teaching yoga I also have a psychotherapy practice. In my continual training as a psychotherapist I am always amazed at how strict the guidelines are about professional ethics—such as maintaining confidentiality or not having inappropriate sexual relations with our patients—while at the same time the psychology of ethics on a personal level is absent from the conversation. One of the greatest differences between the Western and the yogic models of psychology and psychological methods is that yoga begins with a very clear articulation and description of ethics, while Western psychology avoids altogether the topic of ethical action except in terms of professional conduct. It is surprising that the training for people in the helping professions, especially since they tend to be the people who help us make decisions and take action, does not include training in the psychology of being ethical. In the path of yoga, a commitment to the yamas helps us work with our deeply conditioned and seemingly instinctual patterns of reactivity so that our intentions and actions can be motivated by clarity of mind and generosity rather than chronic patterns of reactivity or self-interest. This path makes clear a necessary link between ethics and action.

As we move along the path of yoga, much like when we hike up a mountain, we want to travel lightly. This means not bringing along the weighty baggage of inappropriate relationships, guilt, shame, and the manifestations of a mind caught in greed, hatred, or delusion. The yamas give us clues on how to clear up these things and leave them behind.

The process of unlinking actions of body, speech, and mind is full of difficulty and stress. The demands of desire are endless. Like insatiable energies, they continually strive for satisfaction by creating in the mind the belief that something outside of ourselves can last eternally. Lightening our load begins with the lessons of the first limb through the purification of our relationships both internally and externally.

The whole path of yoga, from beginning to end, orients the practitioner toward a life of reunification. What is most difficult to renounce, however, is the desire for a solid and permanent sense of self. The yamas, as a cornerstone of practice, keep the practitioner embedded in the world of relationships in order to use this relational matrix as a means of seeing through a self-centered reality. The yamas safeguard against the tendency to act out habitual patterns of reactivity.

6. Practicing the *Yamas*

WE FUNNEL all ethical codes or precepts through three modes of practice: body, speech, and mind. We practice *ahiṁsā* (nonviolence) with regard to body, speech, and mind. We practice nonviolence in regard to our own body and to the bodies of others. We practice nonharming in how we speak to ourselves about ourselves and also how we speak to others. Of course, nonviolence of speech also implies the ability to listen, because speaking and listening go together. When we practice nonharming in our own mind we also refrain from harmful thoughts about others. It's always easier to critique the world than it is to see how we have and are contributing to the momentum of violence and inflexibility. There are whole industries devoted to seeing harm outside rather than facing the internal. Negative gossip, not kind and thoughtful reflection, sells newspapers.

I was once in an elevator in downtown Toronto with a five-year-old boy. We were both fascinated by the recent developments in elevator technology that made it possible to simply say "floor thirty-three" out loud instead of pressing a button. Just by speaking we could get a computer to signal the elevator to take us to the appropriate level.

After figuring out the process the five-year-old, realizing this computer was impersonal, started blurting out all kinds of things. "Stupid elevator" turned into every other form of slang he could muster. After a ride with him swearing at the computer, when we'd finally arrived at our destination, I turned to him and asked, "How does that feel? How does it feel saying all those things to a computer?"

"Not so good," he replied. We stepped off the elevator, and he was quiet for the next few minutes.

Sometimes, thinking negative thoughts or saying negative things, even when they are not directed at specific others, has a negative effect on our own felt sense of being. From this reality all sorts of interesting questions arise. Where do my actions end? Do my intentions ripple through the world? Do my actions come

back to me, and if so, how? Isn't my self-realization your self-realization and vice versa?

Establishing a solid basis in nonharming, both internally and externally, roots our yoga practice in an understanding of karma. Karma refers to volitional action and its effects. Every action we take has an effect.

Here is an example of how Patañjali uses the notion of karma in his description of ethical conduct with regard to nonharming in body, speech, and mind:

> 2.33 Unwholesome thoughts can be neutralized by cultivating wholesome ones.
>
> 2.34 We ourselves may act upon unwholesome thoughts, such as wanting to harm someone, or we may cause or condone them in others; unwholesome thoughts may arise from greed, anger or delusion; they may be mild, moderate or extreme; but they never cease to ripen into ignorance and suffering. This is why one must cultivate wholesome thoughts.
>
> 2.35 Being firmly grounded in nonviolence creates an atmosphere in which others can let go of their hostility.[1]

Notice in Patañjali's description of nonviolence how he is always balancing his teachings between the internal world of the practitioner and the external world as well. These passages show not only the interrelation of our actions and our psychological conditioning, they also instruct the practitioner to contemplate and take action in the world of relationships. Patañjali does not describe the result of a nonharmful attitude in terms of one's personal practice; instead he suggests that when one is firmly grounded in nonviolence, it affects others so that they may drop their defensive strategies and hostility. Otherwise, it's like a nuclear superpower telling all other countries that they cannot have nuclear weapons. The premise of nonviolence in this context is that it takes two to maintain a relationship of violence. Nonviolent relationship needs to be initiated by a firm commitment to being honest about the effects of one's choices and actions. When we begin to examine and undo our own harmful intentions and act with moderation we cultivate an atmosphere in which others can do the same.

In Indian art compassion is often depicted as a sharp sword that cuts through

delusion. The *vajra* (thunderbolt) symbolizes the way in which clear, compassionate action cuts through indecisiveness or dishonesty. Nonviolence of speech means that our speech should be honest and loving even when direct and strong. Since words cause both joy and discontent, we work to meditate on our actions of speech continually so that we do not speak untruths, gossip, exaggerate, or try to impress others. This also means using our words clearly to speak up for those who cannot do so themselves, and using our voice to bring awareness to forms of injustice, even if speaking out means threatening our own safety or security. An action based on self-image is never an honest or spontaneous gesture. There is no self-image, we begin to see, without suffering. "Human beings," the philosopher Hilary Putnam writes, "are self-surprising creatures."[2] We may surprise ourselves with our inherent honesty and kindness when we make a commitment to the yamas as wise possibilities for ethical engagement in everyday life.

Treated as dogmatic codes, the yamas become limiting and rigid. However, the yamas are not codes or commandments but simply suggestions that honor the way a wise person lives. If we can become free of self-image through the honest practice of letting go and a deep commitment to others, the yamas open up room for spontaneity and responsiveness. Who knows what letting go will bring? If one falls short, one does not get into trouble for breaking a code but rather studies the experience and the effects of their actions. Yoga is about bringing awareness to our actions of body, speech, and mind.

When people come to our center to study yoga, especially when we have time to meet one-on-one, we always begin by teaching the first yama. Teaching about nonharming immediately sets students thinking about their practice as both internal and external. This cuts off the tendency to create a distinction between formal and informal practice. Also, beginning with teaching about nonharming helps students relate to their experience without judgment or the negative superimposition of poor self-esteem. Instead of negatively judging our habitual patterns, we can get to know ourselves with an awareness free of limiting self-judgment.

After a student gets grounded in the principle of ahiṁsā, we move slowly through each limb, practicing every stage of every limb. This is necessary, because without the underpinning of ethics, practice is separate from the relational world. If the various egoic and inflexible conditions are seen for what they are and then eventually transformed, then one is capable of much greater

intimacy and a fuller involvement with every aspect of experience. Without this process one can practice great yoga postures while leaving the inner psychological world untouched, which can lead to imbalance and greater unhappiness. We can do wonderful arm balances but maintain messy relationships, or we can teach postures but have no insight, compassion, or wisdom; that is not yoga. Seeing clearly means that we tune the mind-body process to reveal how we are connected to all beings and all things, and thus the practice and sharing of yoga is a means of liberating the personality from self-reference, numbness, and existential paralysis.

Satya *and* Asteya

After ahiṁsā, one contemplates *satya* (honesty of body, speech, and mind). This includes being honest with ourselves about our bodies (i.e., self-image), being honest in how we speak with others, and also being honest in our thoughts. From there we practice *asteya* (not stealing). We can translate "not stealing" very specifically, as in, not stealing from others or ourselves, because this causes harm directly or indirectly.

All the yamas are intertwined in sequential order and loop back into one another, in the same way that the layers of the body warp and weave in an interdependent matrix. The common link in the chain of the yamas is meditating on karma and taking actions rooted in nonharming. Nonviolence makes the repercussions of not being honest plainly obvious, because being dishonest causes harm. The same is true for nonstealing. When we steal, not only are we being dishonest, we are causing violence. The actions of violence, dishonesty, and stealing all arise from three sources, according to Patañjali: "greed, ill will or delusion." But, as stated earlier in Patañjali's description of nonharming, "they never cease to ripen into ignorance and suffering." In other words, by using the first limb as a guide we see how yoga begins with a fundamental shift in one's behavior, attitude, and relations through a shift in one's psychology.

When we look at the psychology of stealing, as an example, we can see that the action is a product of an unsatisfied mind. Nonstealing is inextricably linked with one's desires, writes Gandhi:

> We are not always aware of our real needs, and most of us improperly multiply our wants, and thus unconsciously make thieves out of ourselves. If we devote some thought to the subject, we shall find that

> we can get rid of a number of our wants. One who follows the observance of nonstealing will bring a progressive reduction of his own wants. Much of the distressing poverty of this world has arisen out of the breaches of the principle of nonstealing.[3]

We can also practice asteya in subtle ways. *Asteya* literally means "not taking what is not freely given." As a practice, nonstealing, like all the other yamas, orients us toward the transparency of all things and their interrelationship. Often we steal space by taking up more space than we need, physically and psychically. When we are impatient, as another example, we are wrestling with time, caught in a relationship of friction, and in this way, you could consider impatience as an attempt to steal time. J. Krishnamurti says that "patience is not of time."[4] When we are patient, we are not aware of the time, so when there is impatience there is an acute awareness of time. Sometimes an hour feels like a minute and sometimes a minute feels like a day.

Brahmacharya

Brahmacharya for the monk means celibacy, while for the householder it refers to the wise use of energy, especially sexual energy. This is important because insatiable desire not only intoxicates us but turns others into objects. Nonharming as it applies in the sexual domain of body, speech, and mind becomes brahmacharya. This concept encompasses much more than not having sex that harms others. It also includes balancing sexual energy within one's own body, in speech, and also in mind. Sexual fantasies constantly turn others into objects of our desire, and in so doing it prevents us from having a true meeting of two. Aside from the energetic distraction of sexual fantasy, this precept is an important reminder of how often fantasy serves the egoic function of the mind rather than the heart.

This is not to say sex or the topic of sexuality is off-limits in yoga—that is not the case. Both must be embraced as sacred and keys to our psychological maturing. To turn a blind eye to matters of sexuality will always lead to repression. If we try to push away our sexual energy, we end up with a fragmented consciousness that cannot sustain impermanent and natural patterns of energy. As has been well reported, the avoidance or repression of sexual energy in monastic communities, where no one dares to talk about the reality of sexual energy in contemporary life, leads to the underground acting out of those very same energies. Without attachment or aversion, we investigate our circumstances, whatever they are. Instead of pushing sexual energy underground, we want to work with sexual energy as it arises and passes away, and experience the energy simply as energy: impermanent and not something that belongs to the individual self. The core of practicing brahmacharya is to recognize and respect the dignity of our own bodies and the bodies of others.

When we depersonalize sexual energy, it has less of an intoxicating or magnetic effect. From there we can work with it in a wise way. Brahmacharya is not an ethical code based on fear or repression. Rather it is one that encourages an honest appraisal of the energies that move within us, their effects, and how to work with the greater movements of energy, sexual or otherwise. When we bring awareness to the reality that any form of sexual relation motivated by craving will not lessen feelings of loneliness or longing, we become determined to only engage

in sexual relations that fulfill mutual understanding, love, and commitment. We stop pursuing situations that create more suffering, frustration, and isolation. Thich Nhat Hanh councils that in sexual relations, “it is important to be aware of future suffering that may be caused by our actions of body, speech, or mind. We come to know that to preserve the happiness of ourselves and others, we must respect the rights and commitments of ourselves and others.”[5]

Sexual energy tempered by the yamas means treating our bodies with respect and preserving our energy for the realization of our practice ideals, which are compassion and no-separation. This means being as aware as possible of the effect of bringing new life into the world and also, as Thich Nhat Hanh encourages, “meditating deeply on the world into which we are bringing life.”[6]

Even in sexual relations where there is not a literal new life being created, we can meditate on the way in which every sexual encounter creates a new life of relations between two people. New cultures begin with two. In our yoga community, for example, there are several practitioners who are in partnerships but have no children, but they too return often to the teachings of brahmacharya to remind themselves how every encounter between people, especially sexual encounters, creates a new kind of relationship, a new form of life. Brahmacharya, as a guideline, is wide enough to include all people and types of relationships without regard for one’s sexual orientation or position on having children.

Aparigraha

Aparigraha (non-acquisitiveness), comes from the root *grah,* which means "to grasp." Georg Feuerstein translates *aparigraha* as "greedlessness."[7] While this is an excellent translation, it is important to capture the fact that this is not the practice of greedlessness as a final end point but the practice of not acquiring based on greed. It might be more idealistic than realistic to set your sights on a total cessation of want, but we can still do a great deal to simplify and examine the ways greed can manifest.

Like the other yamas, karma comes down to intention. These restraints are designed to restrain the momentum of our self-centered position in the scale of perception and instead turn us toward making the daring leap of changing our habitually exploitative ways. Owning things or accumulating knowledge adds nothing to a life authentically lived. Grasping or always wanting more, in whatever arena, whether material, mental, or spiritual, creates blockage. Greed does not allow things to pass though the present moment because we put ourselves in the way and demand it stays put. But again, this precept of examining your greed is not one based on punishment. It is simply a guideline for a wise way to live that promotes psychological stillness and the transformation of self-centered desire.

7. The *Yamas* beyond Dualism

ATTEMPTING TO PRACTICE ideals like brahmacharya in daily life is challenging, but like all the yamas, such ideals encourage transformation. This transformation diminishes the alienation between self and world so that a sense of mutual connection, responsibility, and empathy can take its place. This is the actualization of nonduality, that is, a lack of self-preoccupation that gives us space to devote ourselves to the welfare of others.

In any form of fantasy or fixation there is no immediate and direct contact with the other. The other becomes an object that we steal for our sensual or imaginative gratification. This is an indirect experience of ourselves mediated by idea rather than by contact. It stems from a desire for control rather than receptivity. When we are free from the stress of dualistic fixation and the ongoing habit of dividing the relational field into two—subject and object or self and other—we emerge free and better able to respond to life.

The yamas, though characterized as restraints, actually serve to open us up beyond a constrained existence. Knowing ourselves through self-image only turns us into objects for ourselves, and this is deeply unsatisfying. Hidden within egotistical strategies of stealing, being dishonest, or treating others as objects, lies a much deeper ache. This longing is obscured by habitual tendency. Yet our deepest longing, also our greatest fear, is to simply be, without creating a need to be. Every negative behavior is a distorted attempt to connect with something greater than our conditioned circumstances. Thus, waking up in the yoga tradition, especially through the practice of the yamas, is waking up to a life of intimacy.

Any project of the ego is a facsimile of direct experience. The ego is always trying to become something other than it is. The yamas are an antidote to these ambitions. There is no world beyond our actions and their eventual effects, no matter how much we try to create something more lasting, utopian, or removed

from relational reality. Frustrated by this reality, we create otherworldly metaphysics, thinking that practice takes us away from this very world, when in fact it only connects us more deeply to the inherent nonduality of self and world.

> O Pavamana, place me in that deathless, undecaying world wherein the light of heaven is set and everlasting luster shines.[1]

These words from the Vedas ring true to the part of us longing (or hoping) for something otherworldly to rescue us from the birth-death-and-birth cycle of existence. We want to create permanence in an impermanent world. The yamas remind us, however, that practice begins in this world, in this body, and nowhere other than right now. You and I are here together, and as such, our relationship forms the basis of the path, not a departure from it. Our relationships are our yoga practice; our practice exists not in some other place or at some other time but in this very interconnected existence of you and I, water and trees, cars and winds, breath and water, rocks and moss, lilies, stars, mind. Our stories about reality create separation, when in fact close examination reveals only the intermingling of forms, coming and going.

The first two limbs, of restraints and ethics, are inseparable from intimacy. What yoga practice entails is not a self-reform or a self-improvement project but rather a complete forgetting of self-enclosure. It entails an unraveling of that continuous checking and rechecking of our sense of self we are so familiar with. We no longer need to check ourselves in the mirror of circumstance, constantly concerned with our place and performance in the scheme of things. We can instead simply be, breathing in and out, taking action based on a direct meeting and response to circumstances. But in order to truly meet our circumstances, we need to see them for what they are, and that is why ethics and psychology are bound together as psychological, social, and environmental action.

This eight-limbed path thus sets out to teach us about our patterns of reaction and also suggests appropriate actions. They are not commandments but rather suggestions. After learning about the ways we react, over and over again, we can embark on a project of action. Yes, we might say, but how do we take action? What do we do? How do we move? What are the conditions for spontaneous action, for feeling whole without needing to *become* “someone”?

There is no way to act that will be judged as ultimately pure or essentially violent, except by those around us. The yamas are designed to open us up to those

around us by motivating us to contemplate our actions of body, speech, and mind, both internally and externally. By being sensitive to the effects of our actions, we open to the greater good. The yamas teach us about karma and the consequences of our intentions. When we do not understand the workings of karma, ethical restraints are not treated as psychological tools but rather as commandments or rules.

Again, it is worth emphasizing that the ethical practices outlined in this first limb are not to be thought of as commandments that will be enforced by an all-powerful god. The nondualist traditions—which include yoga, most forms of Buddhism, some schools of Advaita Vedanta, and Taoism—don't operate within a system of rights and wrongs. A system of right and wrong would turn karma into an aspect of a judging god who rewards or punishes. But this is not what underpins these nondualist traditions. Karma is not related to judgment or punishment. It is retributive only in its effect on us psychologically, not metaphysically. To believe in cause and effect is not the same as believing in good and evil, rather it is a belief that actions create reactions. So, when we attend to karma we are paying attention to our actions in the here and now. From there we begin to see that we have the potential for awakening and also the potential for shutting down. Good and bad, heaven and hell, no longer become external or idealistic places or principles but rather psychological potentials. Instead of a divine that determines what is good or bad, we recognize in ourselves the ability to wake up and also the ability to return to a life of habit. We can react with joy or with anguish. When we see these two energies—waking up or closing down—operating in the mind and body at any given moment, we begin to see how important it is that we meditate on our actions of body, speech, and mind. "It is important to be responsible for everything you do and to see clearly the effects of your actions," my first yoga teacher said when I asked her the definition of *karma.* "What you do right now counts."

Many yoga students tell me that they cannot take action until they come to a place of stillness in mind. They feel they cannot get to a place of stillness without a sticky mat, a buckwheat cushion, or whatever other props they've decided connect them to their practice. But Patañjali does not teach in this way. Though he may not have known about sticky mats and buckwheat cushions, Patañjali would argue strenuously for the practitioner to see engagement in the world and formal practice on the mat or cushion as one and the same. Yoga is not what you practice in a specific studio, under specific conditions. This is where his first limb begins. Abstract ideas about relationship, nonviolence, and ethics are very

beautiful and compelling, but what use are they in terms of psychological change if we cannot put them into practice?

Finding a center of gravity is finding in oneself and others both the stillness of nonreactivity and the vitality of wise, compassionate action. Yoga is not about passivity; it's about being in the world without being enslaved by worldly identification. The formal practices of these eight limbs help ground the practitioner in a balanced practice. The practice in turn uproots any habits in mind and body that prevent true freedom.

The other limbs, which we will discuss in greater detail later in this book, are also specific forms of practice. *Pratyāhāra* is the practice of naturally internalizing attention; *dhāraṇā* is the mindful practice of returning over and over again to an object of meditation such as breath, mantra, sound, or sensations in the body. *Dhyāna* is the unfolding of dhāraṇā into a focused and concentrated state of mind. The stillness of dhyāna then becomes the platform from which one practices the several stages of *samādhi.*

It is important to remember that samādhi is not some final resting place, nor is it a goal of yoga, as many assume. Rather, samādhi is a technique to be practiced like every other limb in the eight-limbed system. It consists of deepening our meditation practice to the point where we experience firsthand the ultimate separation of pure awareness and that which is impermanent. However, samādhi, as a series of techniques, is also subject to change, and returns us, full cycle, to the practice of ethics described in the first limb. If our ethical commitments as outlined in the yamas are not in good order, our progress in samādhi is stalled, and we backslide to the first limb again. This means that the eight-limbed system is a kind of circular set of practices that eventually form the path of yoga. It is not a linear line of steps that end in samādhi. We continually cycle through the eight limbs, studying and practicing each limb in depth in a kind of circumambulation that wakes us up with each turn.

Cultivating a yoga practice is not just about physical flexibility and strength. Cultivating awareness is not about race, gender, or class—it's about waking up to who we are and our place in the world. That is why we start with the yamas.

The heart of yoga is the cultivation of equilibrium in mind and body so that one can wake up to the reality of being alive, which includes not just joy, achievement, and health but impermanence, aging, suffering, and death. A yoga practice that excludes the shadows of illness or aging cuts itself off from the truths of being alive. Similarly, a practice that focuses exclusively on physical

culture and the performance of yoga poses at the expense of psychological understanding and transformation is a one-sided practice. Without the balanced practice of all eight limbs, and a path rooted in the first limb in particular, yoga practice can easily become just another form of materialism.

8. The Five *Kleṣas*

"Saṁsāra Hālāhala," we often chant before we begin an āsana class. *Hālāhala* refers to the poisonous herb of saṁsāra (conditioned existence) that keeps the wheel of suffering in motion. It's said in this chant that we have swallowed the poisonous herb of habitual existence, and the path of yoga is using the poison as a means of finding our way back to complete sanity.

In class Pattabhi Jois often described the basic symptoms of suffering while touching his heart and speaking of "the enemies of the heart." When talking about suffering he located it in the body. But more important than his description of the symptoms of distress were his remarks about how to work with our symptoms as they arise. He would speak of the five *kleṣas,* derived from the *Yoga-Sutra* attributed to Patañjali. In the text Patañjali first describes duḥkha as a product of repetitive psychological and physical patterns, and then describes the five factors that help to put the wheel of suffering into motion. The five kleṣas are as follows: *avidyā* (not seeing things as they are), *raga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), *asmitā* (the story of "I, me, and mine"), and *abhiniveśa* (the thirst for further existence).

One of the interesting ways to analyze how the six poisons are symptoms of the five kleṣas relies on an examination of the term *symptom.* What do we mean by that? A symptom, by definition, is a characteristic or sign of the existence of something else. The term *symptom* comes from *sym,* "together," and *tom,* "part, piece, or slice." This means that any one of the six poisons—desire, anger, delusion, greed, envy, and sloth—is only a slice of what is actually occurring for someone. The symptom is only a sign that we need to look at a deeper level, at the root causes of suffering.

The five kleṣas keep suffering in motion, because they create loops in the mind-body that reinforce habitual patterns of perception and reaction. They are a concise summation of the basic psychological principles of yoga. The term *kleṣa*

comes from the verbal root *klis,* which means “to suffer, torment, or distress.”

Let’s explore the ways in which these five kleṣas create and reinforce patterns of habit. Perception begins in the sense organs. One cannot perceive the world independent of the sense organs and the mind. All experience is filtered through the sense organs and the mind, and as data comes in through the sense organs, it becomes organized into experience. The term *psychology,* in the context of yoga, can be defined as “the organization of experience,” or, more specifically, the way the sense organs and mind organize sense data into subjective experience.

As data moves through the sense organs, we become aware of experience through sensations. We know that there is sensation, because there is always a corresponding feeling. Slowing down allows us to notice the ways in which we organize experience. On close inspection—what we call “mindfulness”—we notice how all sensations give rise to feeling. Feelings can be positive, negative, or neutral. They can be pleasurable or painful. It’s almost as if all sensations in the body fall into one of three buckets: positive, negative, and neutral. For instance, if we are sitting in meditation and feel pain in the knee, we are aware of pain in the knee because we are feeling sensations. Or to put it another way, feeling is a mind-body process.

When we feel feelings that are negative, such as pain in the knee, there is usually a corresponding reaction of either attachment (*raga*) or aversion (*dveṣa*). Attachment is the desire to repeat something pleasurable, and aversion is the act of trying to get away from an uncomfortable feeling. One can sum up both attachment and aversion under the umbrella term *clinging,* because when you look deeply into both, they enact a preference for—or clinging to—pleasure and aversion to what is not pleasurable. Attachment is aversion to displeasure, and aversion is attachment to pleasure. Aversion is clinging to what is pleasurable. Attachment is leaning in, and aversion is leaning away. Most of our psychological and physical energy is spent flip-flopping back and forth, moment to moment, between attachment and aversion.

When we can remove the deeply ingrained habits of our likes and dislikes by seeing how they cause separation and also how we construct and act out these habits, we arrive in a fresh reality without separation. Attachment and aversion are always happening to a “me” outside of experience (see diagram 1), but yoga is the practice of going beyond our habits of creating opposites.

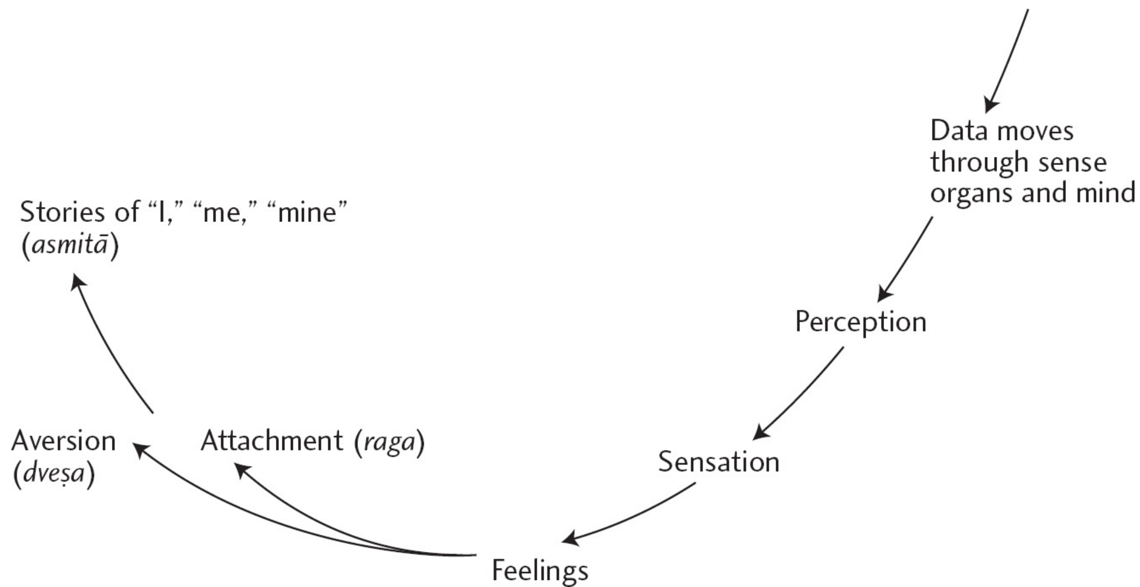

Diagram 1

Whenever one finds attachment or aversion, one also finds a story of self. For example, if there is sensation in the knee that brings an associated negative or painful feeling, it is experienced as a physical phenomenon until the moment that there is aversion to the pain. When the aversion to feeling a negative sensation begins, there is a mechanism in the mind that creates a sense of "I" and superimposes this "I" on the unfolding physical experience. This becomes a movement from feeling pain in the knee to articulating to ourselves the pain in the knee as something happening to "me." We say to ourselves, "There is pain in my knee. *I* don't like this." In this instinctual moment, an "I" is born that has inserted itself into the phenomenon of pain. But this "I" was not initially built into the sensation. In other words, the feeling of pain in "my" knee is an addition to what is unfolding. This is the beginning of duality, because through aversion, a sense of self is created that separates the experience from the one who is experiencing. This whole cycle of creating and telling a story is called "asmitā."

Asmitā, the experience of an "I, me, and mine," comes from a mechanism in the mind called the *ahaṇkāra.* This word comes from the verbal root *kr*, meaning "action" or "to make," and *aham,* which means "I." It is best translated as the " 'I'-maker," and can be thought of as a mechanism in the mind that creates a story of self, which in turn is constructed on top of any phenomenon of feeling occurring moment to moment.

Asmitā, this "I"-maker, as a mechanism that gives rise to the feeling of "I, me, and mine" can, for practical purposes, be conceived of as a storyteller. When you

contemplate your own thinking process, you may come to notice that almost all your thoughts are stories about you. Most of us go through the day telling ourselves endless stories about ourselves. Our perception in daily life seems to pivot around this ongoing narrative of "me." We talk to others about ourselves, and if there is no one around, we talk to ourselves about ourselves and call it thinking.

Many scholars translate ahaṇkāra as "the ego." Freud, for one, defined the ego as that which mediates between conscious and unconscious, internal and external, personal and social. In his theoretical work Freud considered the ego as the center of the personality.

In yoga psychology, the "I"-maker is a cause of suffering (*kleṣa*), because it is constantly filtering our experience in a self-centered way. This conception predates Freud's and takes his idea of narcissism much further. It's not so much that we have fallen for our image of ourselves; rather we are constantly overlaying each moment with a story of self, preventing a direct experience of reality, creating a case of mistaken identity. Furthermore, compassion, listening, or the ability to take in others is always superseded by the aggressive mechanism of the "I"-maker.

Down the road from my house at a local photocopy shop there is on a table with staplers and pens an enormous dense green, blue, and red rubber band ball. Every time I see this ball I think it is a great representation of the human personality and how we create it, layer by layer. To make this ball someone took one rubber band and wrapped it around another, then started layering more and more rubber bands on top. With each layer the ball grows larger and tighter. The personality is like this ball in that the wider the diameter grows, the denser the core becomes. Our stories of ourselves wrap one over another, creating conceptions of self that we fail to see as conceptions. Instead, we come to think of ourselves not as stories wrapped around other stories but as fixed and somewhat permanent entities. As we age, the stories we tell about ourselves, much like the rubber bands on the circumference of a ball, have to be stretched wider and longer in order to wrap around our previous conceptions of self. If we imagine the self as a rubber band ball that is getting larger, we can see how the more we create stories of self, the more the core of the self feels real. The center of a rubber band ball is put under greater and greater pressure. It is tightly wound and feels more like structure than elastic process. The stories of the self give us the impression that the self actually exists, but at bottom, it's simply an unstable cognition. The imagination uses the raw material of life to create narrative

structures that serve to further entrench our belief in a solid and stable entity called "me."

The next kleṣa to examine is abhiniveśa, which is most often understood as the fear of death. Here again we see a space between what we think this fear might be and what this fear actually is. When you contemplate death and the corresponding fear that arises whenever you think about death, you begin to see that what you fear most is not that your body is going to decompose but that the "I" or the story of "me" is going to come to an end. And our egos can find that prospect terrifying. Whether you believe in a future life or not, these stories of "I" that you've been writing, that you've been invested in, will come to an end. And since you can't know for certain what happens at the threshold of death (or even in the next moment, for that matter), the mechanism of the "I"-maker begins to speculate, out of existential fear, since it knows not what will occur beyond that door.

So abhiniveśa is not the fear of the death of the body per se but the fear of letting go of the story of "me." Therefore the purpose of meditation is to watch the process of clinging and thus gain insight into impermanence, which has, as an effect, psychological stillness. The very same phenomena that dominate our lives and actions when we're unaware of them are seen to be impermanent and insubstantial in the light of awareness. Abhiniveśa cuts to the heart of our attempts at permanence. At the moment of death, we can no longer hold on to our conceptions of self. Palliative-care workers describe, time and time again, the difficult process of dying for someone who clings incessantly to their ideas of themself, others, or life in general.

Why should we wait until the moment of death to let go of these constructions of self when we can do so in every moment? We hold on because we believe that these stories of "I, me, and mine" keep us at a safe and conceptual distance from reality, which gives us the illusion of comfort, existential security, and permanence. This illusion is called avidyā. The Sanskrit *vidyā,* as described before, becomes the Latin word *vidéo,* which in English becomes the word *video,* meaning "to see." The prefix *a* turns any word in Sanskrit into its opposite. *Avidyā,* therefore, refers to the inability to see things or be with things as they are. *Avidyā* is a term to describe not being engaged with life as it unfolds and passes away. But why can't we be present with life and see it as it is? We can't see things as they are (*vidyā*) because of our habitual patterns of attachment and aversion. This is an amazing and troubling aspect of our human condition. We already exist as people in the here and now, yet we still try to construct ourselves

as “selves” in the present moment, and in that we often end up missing the present moment completely.

There is a joke in yoga that asks, “If you had to hide the most valuable thing you had, where would you hide it?” to which one responds: “in the present moment.” If you hide something in the present moment, no one will be able to find it. Most of the time we are not present or engaged with things as they are (*vidyā*), because we are so caught in deep grooves of *raga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and our stories of self (*asmitā*).

Since we take actions (*karma*) based on these habituated patterns of attachment and aversion, we reinforce in the mind and body those same patterns. The effects of our actions leave residues in the mind-body and these residues are called *saṁskāra*s. Saṁskāras are the psychological and physical grooves that influence the way we perceive each moment of experience based on previous actions. The saṁskāras condition our organs of perception. Therefore, the actions that we take, and their particular consequences, create in the mind and body predispositions to perceive and act in each moment in habitual and conditioned ways (as illustrated in diagram 2). This completes the cycle of saṁsāra, illustrating the turning wheel of suffering.

It is important to remember that while this cycle describes a state of dissatisfaction, it can also be changed. We are not necessarily trapped in the cycle. The underlying structure of the brain and the basic substratum of the body itself are changing all the time. Always in motion, the brain and body are structurally unstable, which accounts for the flexibility and elasticity of our human organism. Not only do our conditions change, our conditioning can change as well. There are ways out.

To illustrate the way the basic patterns of mind and body (*saṁskāras*) change, imagine film in a camera. Imagine that the film represents your mind, brain, and body. Now imagine using the camera to take a picture of a tree. Once you take the picture the film is exposed to new information, the image of the tree in this case. In order for the image to be retained, the film must react to the light and undergo a change in order to record the image. Similarly, in order for new patterns of behavior and action to be retained in our memory, changes in the mind-body must occur.

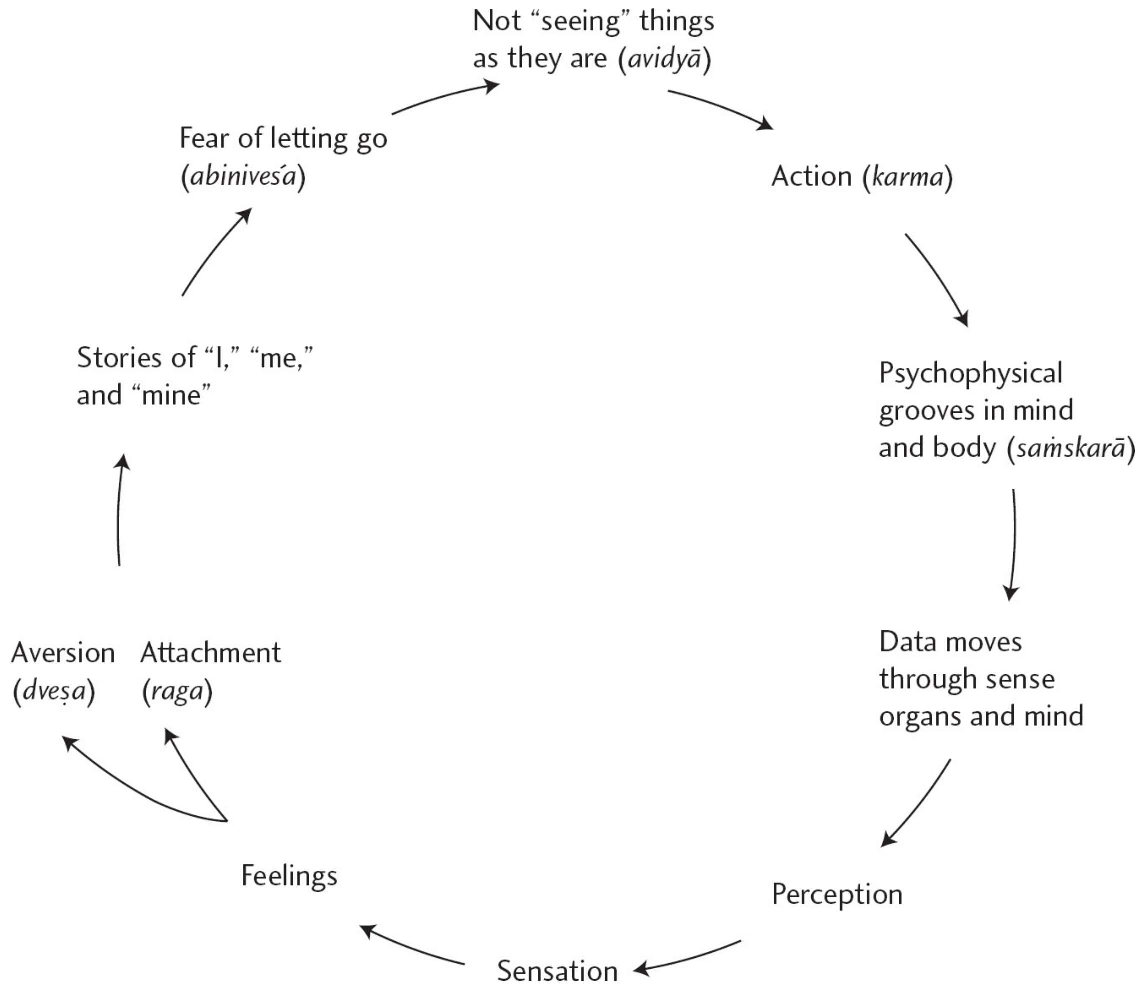

Diagram 2

If we look at diagram 2, we see that not only is this a description of suffering, it is also descriptive of the psychology of addiction. This is because the mind-body circulates the same patterns through repetition, reinforcing repetitive choices and actions. This is to say that the churning of addiction or grasping thoughts are not that different. Once while I was presenting this model to a group of psychiatrists at a conference on mind and body, a doctor described it as "cognitive behavioral therapy on steroids." This model then describes not only the things we think we can be addicted to like cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, work, or sex but also addresses a more subtle level. Even if we are not addicted to a substance, almost everyone is addicted to their stories of self. At the core of any addiction lies the addiction to a story.

Yoga psychology pushes us to see through the addictive tendency to create stories of ourselves. Yoga is a tool for probing and ultimately breaking down this compulsion to represent ourselves to ourselves. These stories that we treat like reality are illusions that cause suffering. These selves we cling to are nothing more than a conglomeration of tales, stretched out and overlapping one another.

Let's use another example. Suppose we are at home alone. After finishing household chores, making a meal, checking e-mail, and engaging in other distractions, we begin to feel lonely. Perhaps this loneliness is accompanied by a feeling of boredom and then sadness. This is probably a common experience for many of us. As the feelings of loneliness and sadness fill our awareness, the mental tendency is to look for a way out of these negative feelings. Instead of allowing these feelings to arise, we turn to the freezer, take out a pint of ice cream, and finish the whole pint faster than we have time to process. If ice cream has never been your treat, and this doesn't resonate, just meditate on what you turn to to avoid loneliness or sadness. After finishing the ice cream in a state of dissociation, we begin to process a threefold feeling. First, we feel physically terrible for having eaten an entire pint of ice cream. Second, there is usually a degree of shame or self-judgment for having indulged in this reactive pattern. Third, the feelings of sadness and loneliness that we tried to avoid with the ice cream return again. Freud called this "the return of the repressed."

What we push down in one area returns in another form somewhere else. This is a universal law. As Albert Einstein articulated in terms of physics, energy is neither created nor destroyed, it just changes form. In terms of lived experience, our attempts to escape feelings we have deemed unacceptable only add energy to other feelings that reinforce our already established habits. Repression does not make anything disappear. What we push away always returns with the same amount of force we expended to keep it at bay.

Let's return to this image of ourselves in a moment of distress. What would happen if instead of going to the freezer when we experience this mild or even acute sense of sadness or loneliness, we sat down and paid attention to our breath? What would happen if we did not react to intensity but rather let it wash into us? Yoga asks us to stay with feelings. It asks us to notice what we want to avoid and what methods we use to get away. Keep in mind this does not mean dwelling in or indulging feelings indefinitely, as that approach can turn into another form of storytelling. Rather, what we want to do is stay patiently in the present moment, accepting whatever is occurring as it arises, unfolds, and passes away. So instead of going to the freezer, allow whatever feelings are arising to

unfold, however uncomfortable, in order for them to be felt fully, until they eventually fade away. Just put your body there and allow sensations to come and go.

Staying present with feelings—especially negative feelings, such as physical or emotional pain—requires an attitude of patience and intentional acceptance. Breathing with uncomfortable feelings requires steadiness, ease, and the ability to sense our experience without judgment or distraction. Mindful awareness is nonconceptual, nonjudgmental, sometimes nonverbal, and exploratory. Pure awareness is not the extinguishing of the self. Rather it is giving allowance for the flurry of construction of the self to build and then lose energy. Some part of you watches the story of "me" as it arises and then allows that story to go still and quiet.

The stilling of these fluctuating stories is not the goal of yoga but rather the technique through which we can wake up to a present moment not obscured by self. This is where the path of yoga begins. The mystic Kabir describes the way in which habitual conditioning and our preoccupation with ourselves have the tendency to hijack our spiritual practice:

> Friend, please tell me what I can do about this world
> I hold on to, and keep spinning out!
> I gave up sewn clothes, and wore a robe,
> But I noticed one day the cloth was well woven.
> So I bought some burlap, but I still
> throw it elegantly over my left shoulder.
> I pulled back my sexual longings,
> And now I discover that I'm angry a lot.
> I gave up rage, and now I notice
> that I'm greedy all day.
> I worked hard at dissolving the greed,
> And now I'm proud of myself.
> While the mind wants to break its link with the world,
> It still holds on to one thing![1]

Like a magnetic force, the habit of orienting our experience around the axiom of "I, me, and mine" is extremely difficult to undo, because as an addictive habit,

it has great momentum behind it. Therefore, the first step is to witness how the mechanism operates from moment to moment. Luckily, there are practical ways of doing this.

The first step of extinguishing this cycle of satisfaction-dissatisfaction is to use the power of naming, to use the linguistic tool of the mind. The mechanism of using language to name (*nama*) something is called *buddhi.* The term *buddhi* means "intelligence," and it is where the mind can recognize something through language. Language allows us to recognize experience. Usually when we are caught up in something, it is hard to name it. This means that naming is a way of establishing distance from sensory objects (*ālambana*) as they appear in awareness so that we can notice what there is rather than slipping into immediate reactivity. But naming is different than storytelling. In these fine distinctions we find the difference between tool and weapon. Language helps us orient ourselves to the object of awareness, and once there we can drop into feeling without storytelling. When we give up our stories, we can usually feel experience with much greater sensitivity, compassion, and clarity. Nonattachment does not mean dissociation; it actually connotes connection and engagement with what is. Nonattachment does not prevent compassion; it sets up the conditions for it.

As an example, when we find ourselves in a difficult yoga pose, and pain arises in the legs, we stay with the pain by reminding ourselves to stay with the leg, hip, breath, and so on, rather than telling ourselves the same habitual stories we tell when faced with strong sensations. In this way we use names like *hip, leg, ankle* to keep us in the present. If we stay with present sensation, we find that the old story of the childhood injury that we have always blamed for tightening the hip has no relevance. So naming is a powerful tool that helps us recognize and investigate our experience. But once something has been named, we don't need to fill the moment with stories. Instead we stay with the reality of the present. (see diagram 3).

Tapas

When we stay with feelings in the mind-body, whether emotional, physical, or both, we are staying in the tension of opposites. This is called "tapas." When we can stay with a feeling without attachment or aversion, we practice tapas. In Vedic times, the term *tapas* referred to the fire at the center of a sacrificial ritual. In the Vedas, rituals revolved around sacrifices in which, through the burning of

various objects, a symbolic offering to the gods secured one a beneficial place in future existence. Over time, the term took on a more subtle meaning. In the

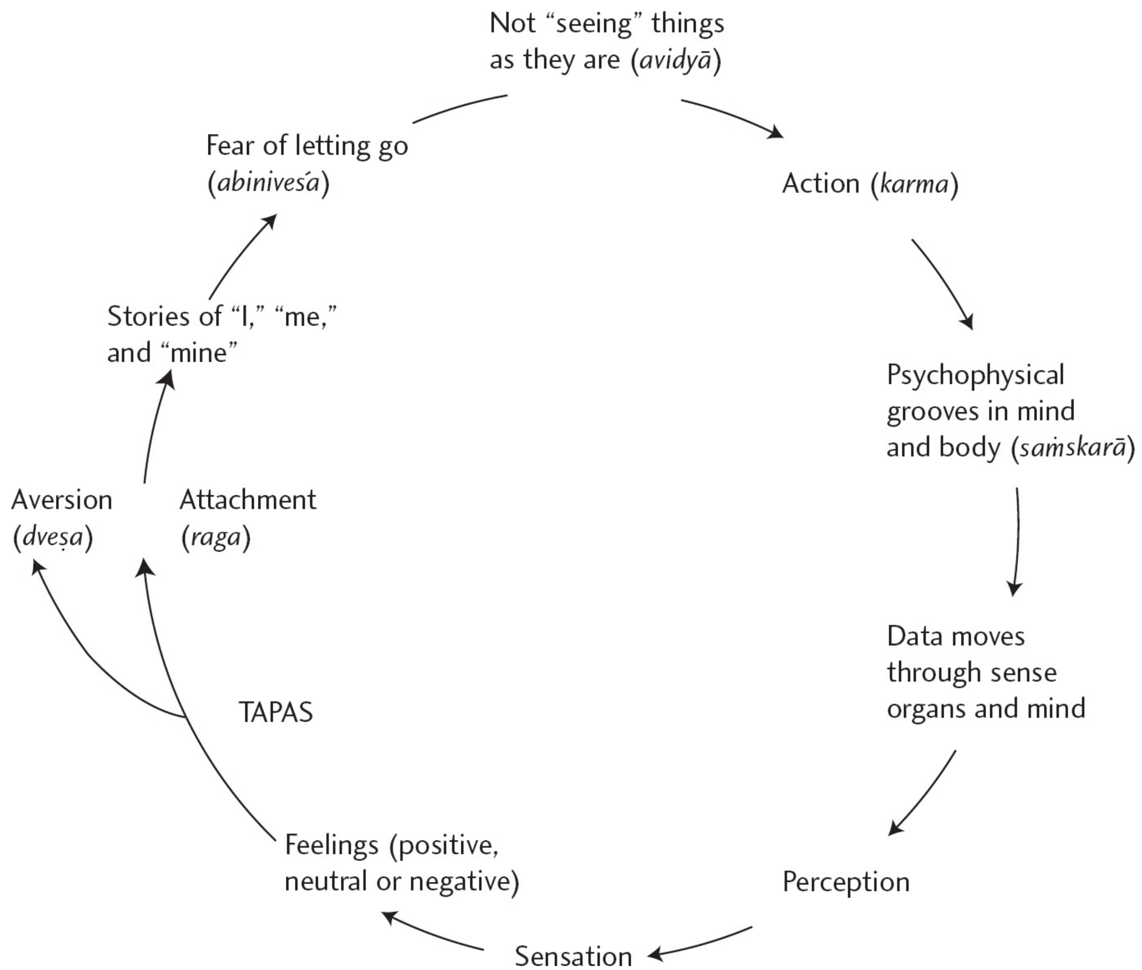

Diagram 3

Upaniṣads, *tapas* refers to austerity, concentrated discipline, penance, or heat. The term was used to refer to a student who is burning with aspiration, or a practitioner who is burning with intensity to know the truth. In the *Yoga-Sutra*, however, it took on an even more psychological meaning. It meant the heat of staying in the tension of opposites. Carl Jung described tapas as the "transcendent function," by which he meant the creative moment that occurs when we stay in the tension of opposites. We can meet any given moment with the conditioned habits of attachment and aversion, or we can meet that moment with spontaneity

and freedom from conditioned responses. Tapas, therefore, can be defined as a refined and lively form of patience. The practice of tapas is a practice of patience.

When we perpetuate the realm of binary thinking—likes and dislikes, me and mine, inner and outer—we fail to embody the root meaning of yoga—the ultimate interconnection and nonseparation of existence. This is not a reality without feeling nor a life dissociated from the world; rather it is the ability to fully engage life and to fully experience its impact. Tapas is being grounded in a reality that is not "apart from." The skill of "grounding" is the activity of staying with *what is* without plotting escape routes. It is the ability to stand still in difficulty that makes new ground. Patience and stillness strengthen the very ground we stand on.

The work of tapas, which is the essence of yoga, is the cultivation of the skills that allow us to be present in the here and now no matter what occurs, whether positive, negative, or neutral. Yoga is the instrument by which we hold ourselves in the fire of habit until we burn away that which averts the heat of change. Staying with habit and the paradoxical discomfort of letting go not only contains the process of yoga but also paradoxically fuels it. Pantañjali says it's a great victory when you can experience a feeling as a feeling. In other words, through this practice we can eventually begin to experience feelings as what they are—impersonal phenomena. We come to see feelings as simply this, rather than explosive dramas of "I, me, and mine." Feeling is the key to the present moment. It anchors us in experience without storytelling.

Staying present in any moment of experience creates new patterns in the mind-body. To illustrate this in terms of psychophysiology, imagine making an impression of a coin in a lump of clay. In order for the impression of the coin to appear in the clay, changes must occur in the clay—the shape of the clay changes as the coin is pressed into it. Similarly, the neural circuitry of the brain, the pathways of the breath and nervous system, and the anatomy of the body must change in response to new experience or sensory stimulation. We make ourselves soft and pliable through practice.

Whenever there is a moment of nonreactivity, this is a moment of action. This is the action of nonaction. Whatever you reflect on habitually becomes, over time, the basic inclination of your mind. Not reacting out of habit creates new patterns—in effect, new and more wholesome patterns of mind, body, and speech. This is the physiology of karma. Every action has an effect, even the

action of nondoing.

Tapas is the key to yoga because being able to sit in the midst of opposition creates the heat necessary for change. Yoga occurs when we let opposites move right through our pores, only to see that opposition is a conceptual designation that falls away when we are with the energy of the moment rather than with our storytelling. In patient openness, what was habit and immobility become receptivity and the capacity to open to experience. Whether this paradox is in the alignment of yoga postures, internal and external rotation in the leg bones, feeling the space between the in-breath and the out-breath, or the cultivation of stillness when habit pulls us into its familiar arms, it is paradox that creates new opportunity. Yoga occurs in paradox when, through tapas, two opposing energies have lost their pull and reveal a completeness. When our attention is on the relationship between opposing energies, they lose their oppositional tension, because we focus on their relationship, not their substantiality.

Freedom from Duḥkha

Let us review the diagram that depicts the wheel of suffering. Patañjali asks the practitioner to consider what can be removed from this cycle and still have a functioning, healthy human engaged in relationship. The answer for Patañjali (as illustrated in diagram 4) is to slice the wheel in half.

Instead of reacting to feelings, we pay attention to what is occurring in the present moment. In doing so, we take actions that reinforce patterns in the mind-body that create the conditions for being just as present in the next moment. In contemporary neuroscience this is called “neuroplasticity.”

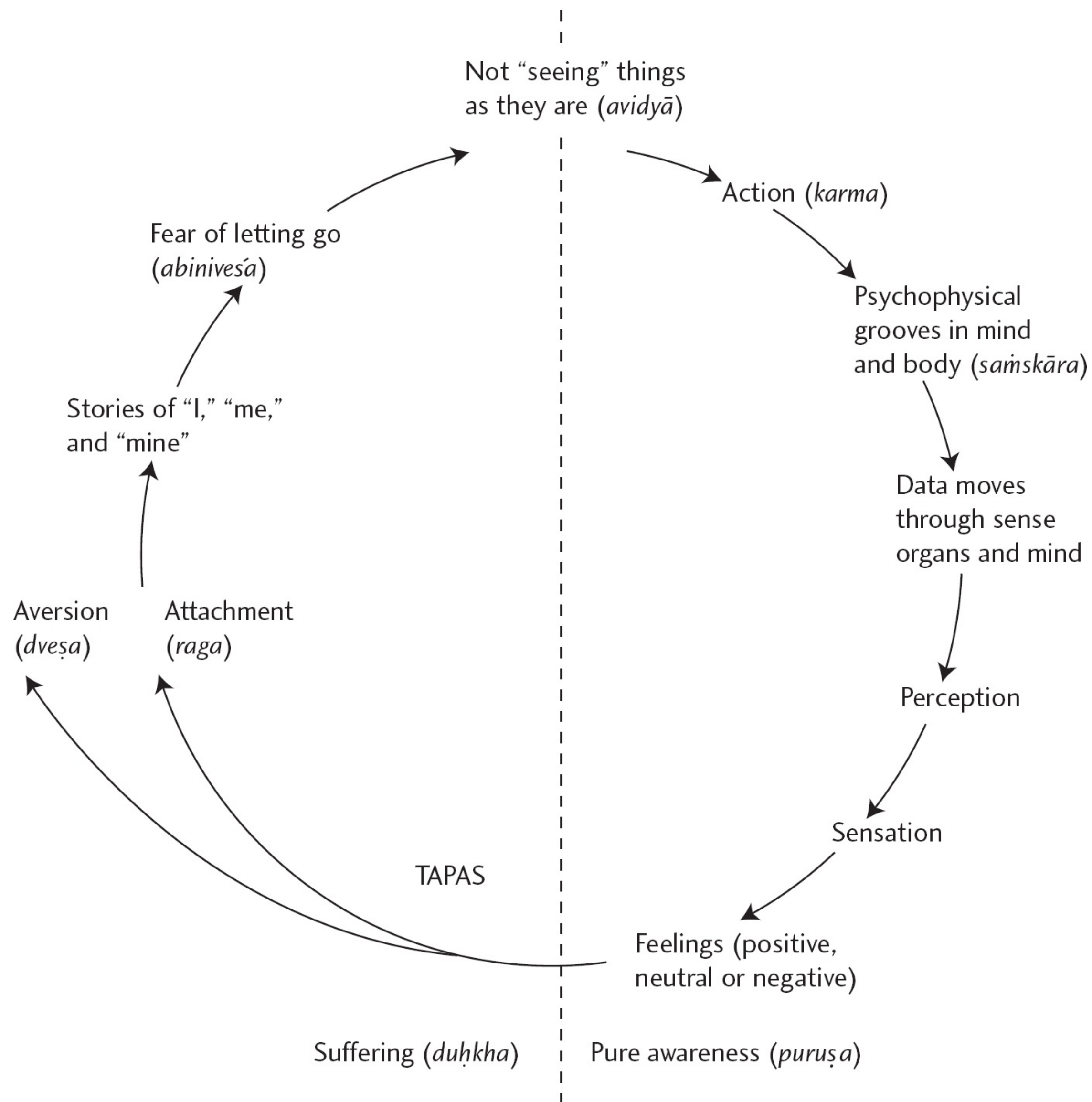

Diagram 4

Neuroplasticity sees the brain as an organ not separated from mind or body, and describes the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life. By sprouting new nerve endings, the brain constantly changes within the context of its environment. This is not a closed system. Like the theory of the saṁskāras, the mind-body is not a closed loop. Our habits, predispositions, attitudes, and behaviors are open and flexible systems constantly in motion, subject to change. They grow increasingly complex in order to become

more and more efficient.

We expend so much energy running away from reality. Most of us are familiar with the conception of mind states that operate like closed circuits. We can all identify with the seeming traps of repetitive, closed cycles like those of addiction, or simply a way of arguing with a loved one that feels endlessly repetitive. We know, too, what it is like to get lost in thoughts of the past or future. We become fixated on what could have been or what we hope or fear is to come. The key in the model of the five kleṣas is that—though the mind-body is contracted in states of addiction and delusion—these self-centered and inflexible habitual states are not permanent. A moment of suffering can also reveal a path out of suffering. It is the very intensity of each one of the kleṣas, when experienced fully, that pushes us into seeing where the mind is fixated and what it is holding fast to. Unlike the detached state of pulling away from experience, nonattachment creates flexibility by bringing us closer to what is actually occurring, even as we are less encumbered by our viewpoint. Relaxing the heart when we find contracted states can disentangle us from the web of self-identification.

Yoga practice is about expanding and strengthening circuits in the mind-body that are perhaps weak and neglected. It is about repatterning and forming new, flexible responses. This is called *nirodha.* Nirodha is the releasing of habitual patterns or fluctuations in the mind-body, but the term also describes the energy that comes from that letting go of old patterns.

If we look at diagram 4, on the left-hand side, we see a model of duḥkha (from attachment/aversion all the way to avidyā). But in diagram 5, on the left-hand side, we see a model of a personality free from the constraints of a conditioned existence of stress and discontent. In this diagram we see the spontaneous expression of a personality free from the need to create the self. When you no longer need to create a sense of self, you are free to be yourself. In this way, you can use the mind to create a more solid base from which to see and take action. However, the solid base is not ontologically substantial but rather the psychological sense of being existentially grounded in the midst of change.

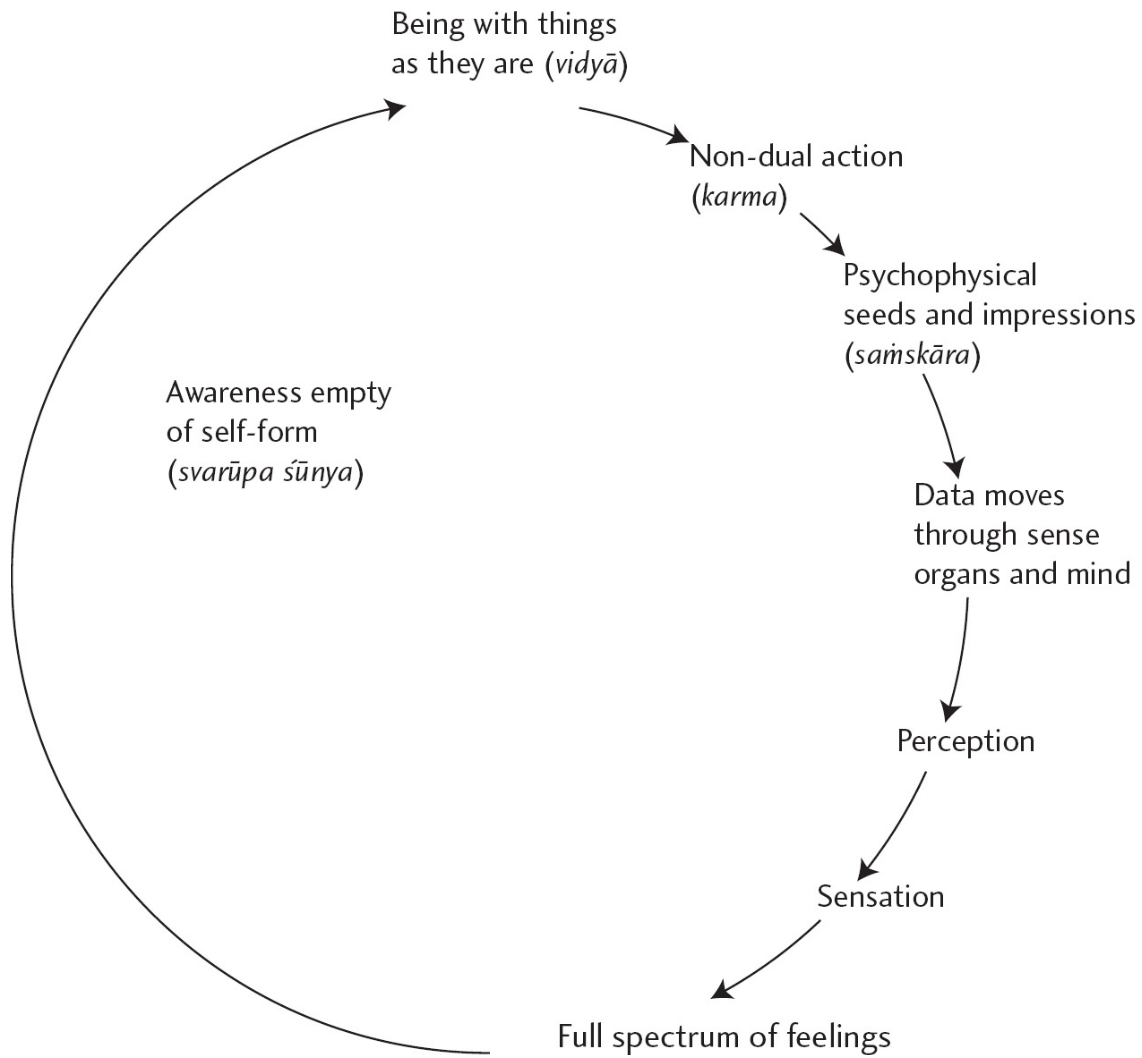

Diagram 5

In yoga, instead of taking a pilgrimage to a particular mountain or temple, we take pilgrimage inside of our own bodies. For most people, this is a more difficult pilgrimage than any we would undertake in the external world, given that there are many psychological, emotional, and physical holding patterns in the center of the body that make this pilgrimage difficult. That challenge is also our potential for liberation. To travel through the landscape of the body open to feeling puts us in touch with the core of the body.

9. Freedom through the *Kleṣas*

> Wherever your mind applies its full power of attention, there you make a seat for yourself.
>
> —*Rig-Veda*

THE FIVE KLEṢAS teach us that by putting a wedge between our feelings and our aversion or attachment to them, we make space for ourselves in present experience. Letting go of a self-centered response to reality brings us into a more realistic, clear, and grounded relationship with life, and this manifests in intelligent action. At first this may seem like a paradox, or a game of games. And in a certain way, it is. By saying that the construction of self can fall away, we are not saying there is no self. Rather, we are saying that the construction of "self" can be seen through. We are not trying to eliminate narrative all together. Human beings love to tell stories. What this model proposes is that we suffer when we cannot see stories of ourselves as just stories.

Patañjali describes two methods for moving from a cycle of duḥkha to a cycle of freedom. The first is *abhyāsa,* which is the cultivation of new patterns in the mind and body. The second is *vairāgya,* which is the letting go of habitual patterns. As an example, I think we can all agree that self-judgment is one of the dominant stories in contemporary Western culture. We have been told the story of self-criticism or self-judgment so many times that we are experts who use the story all the time without even noticing. This means that our work as practitioners is to monitor the quality of our awareness, which means catching the stories of self-judgment as they unfold. When we catch ourselves in a story of self-judgment, we practice abhyāsa, which in essence means cultivating a kinder and more compassionate story to break down the tendency toward self-judgment. Abhyāsa refers to letting go of the story of self-judgment by seeing through it. Again, we see a story as a story, and in seeing a pattern as a pattern, we create just enough distance from the pattern that we can see it for what it is and let it go.

It is common for people to react to this call for the dropping of the story of self by saying that this can occur only for those who have a strong sense of self. People often feel that people with low self-esteem *need* to construct a story of self. But replacing a bad story with a better story still means we are enslaved to stories. Many modern therapeutic formulas that address low self-esteem fail because they are simply replacing one story of self with another more alluring story. The root problem that begins in the mechanism of the "I"-maker is primarily the clinging to a singular narrative.

Many people with low self-esteem are very attached to their story of self. In fact, many people with low self-esteem cling harder and identify more deeply with their stories of self than people who have an inflated sense of self. Low self-esteem is the identification with a very specific narrative of self. Clinging to notions of self are attempts to actualize something that is ultimately unknowable and empty. In his groundbreaking work, *The Restoration of the Self,* Heinz Kohut, one of the great psychoanalytic theorists of the last century, wrote,

> My investigation contains hundreds of pages dealing with the psychology of the self—yet it never assigns an inflexible meaning to the term self, it never explains how the essence of the self should be defined. But I admit this fact without contrition or shame. The self…is, like all reality…not knowable in its essence. We cannot, by introspection and empathy, penetrate the self per se; only its introspectively or empathically perceived psychological manifestations are open to us.[1]

Whether there is or isn't a sense of self in psychological or "introspective" terms, in simple experience, the actuality of an abiding essence that is traceable back to some particular source, entity, or substance is nowhere to be found. We do not have a single self outside of our stories of self.

Dropping the Narrative

Yoga psychology is a series of techniques that interrupts all forms of attachment, especially our attachment to self. In the second limb, articulated in the second chapter of the *Yoga-Sutra*, Patañjali describes *svādhyāya* (self-study) as a method of seeing through our attachments. It's important to remember that self-study

does not refer only to self-reflection but more so to the investigation of the nature of constructing a self to begin with. We are not so much interested in the manifestation of self as we are in what's behind the need to construct a self at all. This is the work of dropping the story line.

When we contemplate that which we cling to most, we find, embedded in the deepest and most condensed recesses of the personality, elaborate narratives. Narrative implicitly assumes causality—that such and such happened and, in turn, caused a certain result. But the logic of narrative—and Indian myths point this out over and over again—is always flawed. The basic fact is that a narrative is simply a narrative. A story is just a story, and though we may call our stories scientific theory, theology, psychology, law, history, or self, these are all still constructed attempts to interpret reality through linguistic description and expression. The construction is what is important. This is illustrated very well in a famous story about Kṛṣṇa:

Kṛṣṇa comes to earth in the form of a young boy. Like many young boys, he is playing with other kids and eating dirt. Out of the corner of her eye, his mother catches him eating dirt, and asks, "Kṛṣṇa, are you eating dirt again?" To which he responds, with his mouth closed, "Hum, no."

Again, she asks, "Kṛṣṇa, are you eating dirt?"

And with a mouthful of dirt he turns away. One of the other children with whom Kṛṣṇa is playing turns to Kṛṣṇa's mother and says, "Yes, Kṛṣṇa is eating dirt."

Immediately, as any mother would do, she pulls him out of the group and away from the rest of the kids, then forcefully opens his mouth to find dirt all over his gums, teeth, and tongue. With her hands holding his mouth open, she peers in a little farther, and behind the root of his palate, she sees a familiar darkness. As if looking into a blackened night sky she focuses again. Then, within that darkness, she sees the bright moon, a sky of stars, moving constellations, and then sees herself as Kṛṣṇa's mother, and passes out. Amid the dust and profundity of her vision, she lies on the ground unconscious.

Seeing his mother passed out, Kṛṣṇa kneels down in the sand, and waves over her the illusion that she is his mother. She then wakes up, feeling herself again as Kṛṣṇa's mother, and everything is OK; she returns again to the responsibility and safety of her role and her place in the fabric of her culture.

In calling her son away from the other kids who are also eating dirt, Kṛṣṇa's mother exemplifies the typical and relative relationship of mother and son. There

is no denying that in this circumstance Kṛṣṇa's mother is acting out the instinctual role of motherhood, and that Kṛṣṇa, in eating dirt, is being a young boy. This is the familiar, relative world of mother and son. When Kṛṣṇa's mother looks into her son's mouth and sees the stars and the moon, this represents the mystical experience that is, in essence, direct experience of the present moment. It represents the falling away of all of Kṛṣṇa's mother's attachments, perspectives, and views, only to reveal her most cherished attachment: identification with the role of mother. For most parents, this is one of our most cherished attachments—being a parent. However, Kṛṣṇa does not belong to his mother. On a relative level, Kṛṣṇa is her son. But on an ultimate level, Kṛṣṇa's mother gains insight into the truth that nothing belongs to "I, me, or mine." However, this is too much for her to bear, so she passes out.[2]

In other versions of this story, Kṛṣṇa tries these games over and over, yet in all these stories, Kṛṣṇa's mother never lets go of her attachment to herself as a mother. This paradoxical repetition demonstrates the complexity of nonattachment in the realm of human relationships. Our mind creates stories of self and other, and it strings them up on banners in the consciousness. But although those advertisements feel real, they are actually just patterns and slogans flapping in the wind.

Detachment can be painful. It can be very difficult to come to terms with the reality that even our parents, children, lovers, or friends are not and can never belong to us; they can never be "ours." In the story, Kṛṣṇa is *of* the mother but does not *belong* to the mother. On a biological level, the story of Kṛṣṇa eating dirt touches the heart of our relational existence. This concept is described clearly by the physician Hélène Rouche in an interview with the philosopher Luce Irigaray:

> First, I'll remind you of what the placenta is: It's a tissue, formed by the embryo, which, while being closely imbricated with the uterine mucosa remains separate from it. This has to be reiterated, because there's a commonly held view that the placenta is a mixed formation, half-maternal, half-fetal. However, although the placenta is a formation of the embryo, it behaves like an organ that is practically independent of it. It plays a mediating role on two levels. On the one hand, it's the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means that there's never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms, not merely quantitatively regulating the exchanges (nutritious

> substances from mother to fetus, waste matter in the other direction), but also modifying the maternal metabolism….It thus establishes a relationship between mother and fetus, enabling the latter to grow without exhausting the mother in the process, and yet not simply being a means for obtaining nutrition.[3]

The placenta, continues Hélène, also takes over from the ovary itself by producing steroids that go to both mother and infant. This relates to the leash of asmitā in a profound way. The division of a "you" and "me" and the belief that we can unite with another or even belong completely to another is physiologically inaccurate. The relative autonomy of the placenta ensures the growth in one body of another body.[4] Biology and psychology intertwine here. One could almost say that the placenta acts as an agent that maintains both the separation of the infant and mother and their mutual interdependence as well. It's not that Kṛṣṇa is not the son of his mother, it's that relationship and nonbelonging go together. The role of the placenta makes the actuality of a child in a womb seem more like a transplant than anything willed by the parent or infant.[5]

This is more than just a paradox; it is a negotiation between what is ours and what is other. The kleṣas implore us to see that there is no solid "I" to be found anywhere that is eternal. The desire to hang on to a fixed and everlasting "self" is a mistake. One holds on to it to maintain the momentum of satisfaction-dissatisfaction, because we cannot get security out of concepts of the eternal. We hold on to a vision of the self, because it can seem small enough to feel real. We get married, we have a child, we seek definitions in order to pin our present on things that feel inflexible and permanent. But think about the example of the placenta. It does not describe a state of fusion but rather a transitory relationship. When faced with this we may react and say, alright, fine, there is no self, but this falls too far on one side of the spectrum, and is therefore also incorrect. At the moment of birth, once the child exits the mother's body, the placenta departs as well, not belonging either to mother or infant yet supportive of and contingent on the survival of both. We are simultaneously linked and separated.

If we return to diagrams 4 and 5 of the five kleṣas from the last chapter, we can see that any form of attachment or aversion not only constructs a clinging narrative of self but also creates the conditions for dissatisfaction. The storyteller is always searching for a way to superimpose itself on experience. Why? It is because wherever there is a story, wherever there is a construction of self, there is

always also anxiety. This anxiety is existential in nature. It is existential because the storyteller knows at some deep level that without its ongoing chatter, things would actually go smoother.

When Pattabhi touched his heart while taking a deep breath, he was pointing to the kleṣas as the five enemies that keep the heart from opening. An open heart, a human simply being, immediately presents a manifestation in nature of just being. To simply be without separation caused by the five kleṣas allows the heart to remain open to the inherent change and flux of life, without clinging and its related stress. To feel without getting out of the feeling, no matter how joyful or painful, is to be in touch with the pulse of life. Even a broken heart is an open heart if one can just dwell in it.

The practicality of this for the yoga practitioner is obvious. Vidyā means being with what is. Vidyā means noticing how a thing changes as we observe patiently. When we watch, we see what continues, what is permanent, to whom or what a thing belongs. If the self is a fiction rather than some static and eternal entity, and we can recognize that, then we can begin to embrace it as such. The poet Wallace Stevens describes this kind of psychological freedom in his work "Adagia" when he writes, "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."[6]

Our work as yoga practitioners is to breathe our circumstances. Avidyā is the mistaken conception that anything can provide permanent satisfaction or ongoing security. Mistaken conception leads to mistaken perception. If we are confined to a representational reality, we are always bound to our theories of reality rather than direct perception through the senses and mind.

10. Stillness and Movement

In most classes in the West, teachers will show us the physical practice of postures and breathing without mentioning the psychological aspects of yoga. Perhaps this is because the mind is an elusive absence, even though its habits are woven into every aspect of physical movement. Many think of the psychology of yoga as some kind of abstract "philosophy" that is better left out of a class dedicated to physical practice.

It's easy to idealize the cultures of India and Tibet and assume that all yoga practitioners there have always been doing subtle psychological work. But in truth it's hard for anyone to say what is happening inside a practitioner. It is hard to know what people are learning or transmitting. What is hidden in history is conjectural from our present day, and it's difficult, if not impossible, to be a historian of the inner world and see the effects of yoga, because we have access only to the outside view.

However, judging by the sophistication of material they produced, we can get a sense that the teachers there were interested in communicating the psychological and not just the physical elements of the practice. We do know that from these cultures, highly evolved texts, practices, and teachings arose from practitioners who were able to, as Erich Schiffmann says, "move into stillness."[1] Breath, mind, stillness, and movement were always intertwined in order to study the mind-body and the way out of discontent.

What we mean by "stillness" is psychological stillness. We tend to the body with its infinite layers by spreading our breath throughout these layers without being apart from the experience. We use the experience to wake up. We use the body to study the mind and the mind to study the body so that we come to see the inherent interpenetration of mind, body, and world.

Pushing practice a step further, we come to see that the body is always changing, energy always blooming, and mind always thinking. Thoughts are endless. But underneath all that movement there is complete stillness; our conditioning is more flexible, our minds more elastic, our habits more pliable than we ever thought. However, going deeper into the psychology of yoga requires the cultivation of our attention span so we have the capacity to rest in

stillness rather than moving through the ongoing distortions of habit.

If there is a historical pattern in yoga to be gleaned from texts such as the *Yoga-Sutra,* the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpika,* or even the miraculous *Bhagavad Gītā,* it is that every time yoga becomes overly physical, lost in ritual, or focused on mere physical achievement, there is a backlash, which pushes people to return to the deeper mental elements that support the physical work. When we look deeply into the body, we find the mind. When we look into the nature of mind, we find nothing other than the "stuff" of life—changing, interconnected, vibrating, and without absolute structure.

The yoga community that is evolving in the West, especially the network of studios offering public classes, is in a phase of struggle. Students want to deepen their practice, but they often only have access to either physical study or esoteric philosophy. Of course, this is a generalization, but I think it will ring true. In most cases, we find little in classes and workshops in the way of psychology. Yet, it is precisely yoga's capacity to address the mind and the weave of the mind and body that contemporary practitioners need most. Most of us have our deepest troubles and anxieties stored up in mind stuff.

Texts such as the *Yoga-Sutra* are profound psychology textbooks, pointing the way toward liberation from duḥkha. The physical practices if used correctly are profound gateways into our mental constructs. You do not have to choose physical or psychological practice—they are two parts of a greater whole. As practice matures, it expands horizontally, across all eight limbs, so that you begin to explore the role of the mind in any meditation on physical reality, and conversely, you begin to meditate on the empty nature of physical reality when studying the mind.

When you are able to still some of your reactions and turn away from distraction, duality dissolves. Behind a "me" and "my experience" is reality as it is. You may have your own particular tendencies, but your thoughts are all put together by thoughts. Conversely, pure awareness is not personal. And actually, not much is personal. Even your body is the result of a greater past. You cannot penetrate the "yoga" of yoga—the inherent oneness of reality—if you are preoccupied with yourself. If there is any prejudice, self-judgment, or preconceived idea about yourself or life in general, the practice is stuck in habit. So, we need to get to know that habit.

We must recognize though, that habit does not dissolve easily. So, we work with it with patience, and as we move with habit, seeing it for what it is, we can

put aside our preferences and take in something greater than our "selves." This is the root of saṁsāra and the route beyond saṁsāra. Beneath all our ideas and expectations is a constant flow of homeless feelings and thoughts, images and sensations, moving endlessly and without structure. We must recognize it is we who force them into structure when we decide to call parts of this ever-shifting flow "I, me, and mine." From that labeling, structure is born and so too is duḥkha.

Yoga becomes subtler the more we observe and feel with great attention and patience, without comment, assumptions, or a strong attitude toward the object of our observation. When we meditate on body or mind "stuff," we feel and watch, witness and learn, with openness to what is arising and passing away in the present. When we accept what is in this very moment, without pushing or pulling, running away or clinging, we find a level of deep acceptance and peace in practice. In this way, there is no mind observing a body. There is simply the unfolding nature of nature as it comes and goes. Every posture instruction becomes a fresh route toward awareness, another stretch of intelligence. With an attitude of kindness and nonviolence, yoga practice matures internally. Whatever we feel we feel. Whatever we think we think. When we create space enough for feelings and thoughts to come and go in this container of mind and body, meditation occurs spontaneously. As Sankaracarya explains, "One should know that a real posture is that in which the meditation of reality [Brahman] flows spontaneously and unceasingly, and not any other…"[2]

When the pushing and pulling exhaust themselves, the central axis of the body opens, like a plumb line. We practice yoga to wake up the mind and body in order to find liberation and joy. It is not a practice to perfect feats of physical accomplishment. That is why we should develop a yoga practice that includes both mind and body as one. As we open up feeling pathways, the world begins to move more easily through this mind-body process we call "self." Instead of taking a pilgrimage to a holy mountain or temple, we travel through the internal landscape of the mind-body without distraction or clinging.

11. The Five *Kośas*

SHEATHS OF THE MIND AND BODY

YOGA IS ESSENTIALLY concerned with teaching us to perceive and respond to reality in such a way that we can transform our perceptions and responses to suffering so that the suffering is resolved. While this process may lead us to ask legitimate philosophical, psychological, and religious questions, these questions are of secondary concern. The aim of the yoga path is to recognize suffering in its various manifestations and conditions and to cultivate the skills necessary to bring the suffering to an end. As Pattabhi Jois explained in his description of the enemies in the heart, there are five factors (*kleṣas*) that contribute to the experience of suffering and stress, namely, not being with things as they are (*avidyā*), attachment (*raga*), aversion (*dveṣa*), the stories of "I, me, and mine" (*asmitā*), and the fear of letting go (*abhiniveśa*).

One of the best ways of seeing what causes suffering is to contemplate the mind-body, and one of the best ways of approaching the mind-body is through the lens of the five kośas. The five kośas are a kind of magnifying glass or prism through which we can better understand the workings and interaction of perception, consciousness, feeling, breathing, and physiology. In addition, the kośas become a meditative tool through which we can undo the habits of the five kleṣas.

On the surface, the kośas name the layers of mind and body and provide explanation of how they interact. But when one practices the last four limbs of meditation the kośas become a set of strategies for how and where one should focus one's attention. This system offers a kind of sequential logic for meditative practice.

Some Hatha Yoga teachers, such as B. K. S. Iyengar, use the kośas as a means of explaining how the various layers of mind and body both interpenetrate and also operate consciously or unconsciously, depending on where our awareness is.

Iyengar uses detailed mechanical and metaphorical instructions as meditation techniques that assist the practitioner in sensing the various factors that comprise mind and body. This helps get the mind focused on the gross and subtle aspects of a yoga posture and all the layers in between. Describing what constitutes the mind and body, B. K. S. Iyengar writes that mind and body as a whole "consist of five interpenetrating and interdependent sheaths."[1]

The *Paingala Upaniṣad* describes the koṣas thusly:

> The five sheaths are made of vital air, mind, understanding, and bliss. What is brought into being only by the essence of food, what grows only by food, that which finds rest in earth full of the essence of food, that is the sheath made of food, annamaya kośa. That alone is the gross body. The five vital airs, along with the organs of action, constitute the sheath made of the vital principle, prāṇamaya kośa. Mind, along with the organs of perception, is the sheath made of mind, manomaya kośa. The understanding, along with the organs of perception, is the sheath made of intelligence, vij̃ñanamaya kośa. These three sheaths (of life, mind, and intelligence) form the subtle body. The knowledge of one's own form is of the sheath made of bliss, ānandamaya kośa. That is also the causal body.

There are several different sheaths that constitute what we call the mind-body. When we practice yoga postures, meditation, and prāṇāyāma, we are consciously or unconsciously working with these various sheaths. How so depends on the quality and place of attention. Our attention can move among the dense and obvious aspects of the body, including anything from self-image, to emotion, to the feeling of bone and skin. We can also attend to the temperature of the body, the movement of breath within the body, sensations, and even subtle energetic movements. The mind-body is much like the layers of an onion; each layer can be seen as a pattern seemingly separate from the other layers, yet on closer inspection, the sheaths of an onion interpenetrate one another. Each is contingent and provisional. The kośas represent the interconnection of mind, body, emotion, thought, and stillness—aspects of human experience that cannot ultimately be separated from one another.

Any type of stress, whether physical, mental, or emotional, causes tension in our bodies. These stresses accumulate from static, repetitive, or sustained posture. Posture can include physiological holding patterns, but according to the theory of

the kośas, all postural holding patterns are always both physiological and psychological.

The term *kośa* means "sheath," "cover," "subtle body," "treasury," or "lexicon," and comes from the root *kus*, meaning "to enfold." The sheaths are of five layers or frames that fold into one another. They consist of (1) *annamaya kośa,* the anatomical sheath, made up of bones, tendons, muscle groups, and other gross or dense masses; (2) *prāṇamaya kośa,* the physiological sheath, made up of the circulatory system including the respiratory, nervous, lymphatic, and immune systems; (3) *manomaya kośa,* the psychological sheath, which includes the mind, feelings, and the processes that organize experience; (4) *vijñanamaya kośa,* the frame responsible for intellect and wisdom; and (5) *ānandamaya kośa,* the aspect of the body where everything is as it should be. This is often described either as a sense in the body of everything being OK, or when one feels that the body is simply a form of energy or impersonal flow.

One cannot talk about one sheath without talking about the ways in which it is contingent upon other sheaths, because they all work together as a whole to form our interdependent life cycle. When the breath draws in through the nostrils and my respiratory diaphragm descends, I feel the breath in terms of sensation. Simultaneously my mind conceives of the breath in terms of an image, name, or form, and if I am somewhat focused, I may also have thoughts about the breath, memories, or feelings associated with the simple activity of breathing in. All the sheaths work together, like a lexicon or matrix, and the theory of the kośas describes this complex interconnection.

The five kośas act as a prism through which we can observe, feel, and investigate the mind-body working as a whole. This is something that was described in great detail but in a different language by Sigmund Freud at the turn of twentieth century. Sometimes we forget that Freud was originally a physician, and that almost all of his first patients came to him with physical symptoms. Freud would have them lie down on a long couch with their eyes closed and describe with language what they were feeling in their bodies. He would sit in a chair behind his patients so as not to infringe on their psychic space. His startling discovery, in what would become known as the "talking cure," was that physical symptoms always had a psychological counterpart. As people would talk about their physical symptoms, the symptoms would move and, in some instances, pass away all together. Talking, or the psychological recognition of what was being felt in the body, brought mind and body together in a healing way.

To say that these symptoms were purely physiological would be incorrect, because through language, and what Freud later called free association, those symptoms changed. To say that these holding patterns are purely psychological, or to go further and say that these patterns are all in the minds of those patients, would also be incorrect, if only because the physical symptoms they presented were undeniable. In other words, no deep holding pattern in the mind-body is exclusively physical or psychological, but rather always a combination of both.

What this means to the yoga practitioner is that one is always working with both mind and body, and to conceive of a yoga practice as purely a physiological form of exercise is to miss the internal and subtle aspects, which must include the psychological. So, if we choose a particular aspect of the body, such as the myofascial system, the emotions, the nervous system, or the breath, we must always see it against and within a tapestry of the other sheaths.

The annamaya and prāṇamaya kośas are of course the simplest layers to get a feel for. You can think of these sheaths as a three-dimensional matrix that connects every cell to every other cell within our entire body of bones, muscles, organs, and skin, all of which are animated by breath. Perhaps the most important quality of these sheaths is that they record all physical, mental, emotional, and cognitive activity.

An example of how these two sheaths interconnect can be seen within the myofascial system, which is composed of collagen and elastin fibers that provide flexibility and support for the entire musculoskeletal system, connecting all structures to other structures, forming a protective conduit to keep external pressure off the neurovascular system, and holding memory. It is not just the mind that maintains memory but the unconscious, which is normally associated with our psychology and exists primarily in the body. All sheaths hold memory.

What is most compelling about the kośas is that they offer us a paradigm through which we can feel and investigate the interpermeating nature of the mind, body, breath, and energy as it manifests in the here and now. I have found the kośas a transformational tool because they show how the interconnections between different organizing principles of human experience work together. The breath links up with changes in the mind, and the mind in turn affects our perception of the body in time and space. Our habitual patterns of movement influence and are influenced by all these other links in the chain. Posture affects perception, and perception affects posture. Furthermore, these links are much more than separate knots or ties, because they are made up of one another. The

mind and body are made up of magnitudes and dimensions, connections that are interwoven and indivisible.

This gets at the heart of yoga, namely it gets at the union, ecology, and interplay of life as it manifests in human form. Whether it's a strong sensation in the stomach, or a daydream during a breathing practice, every aspect of human experience contains lines that tie back into one another. How can we posit any form of duality and separateness once we see just how fundamental these interconnections are?

I have always been impressed by the teachings of B. K. S. Iyengar particularly because of the way he pulls together striking connections between breathing, movement, and the mind. Very few yoga teachers have been able to move so thoroughly and deliberately through the precise techniques of yoga postures and breathing where suddenly the limb of āsana opens up to the other limbs. Practicing yoga postures with precision of attention cuts through any polarities in our thinking, because the mind gets so focused on immediate experience that the experience opens into a wider dimension of interconnection.

The kind of attention subtle āsana practice requires focuses the mind on process rather than structure, change rather than stability, and flow rather than discrete movements. This opens up the mind to the present moment, the feeling of spontaneity, change, and chance, pulling the mind out of the duality of subject and object, mind and matter, submission or dominion. This is because yoga postures offer insight into the value of all forms of human experience. As we go deep into the matter of our bones we find not building blocks or pieces in conversation but rather a complicated web of relations between various parts of the whole. Yoga is synonymous with that whole. The universe of even one breath cycle is completely whole and unbroken. When the mind breaks things up into parts and pieces belonging to a "me," that whole is turned into fragmented experience, but that fragmentation is an illusion. The body and mind that at first appear to the practitioner as solid structures eventually reveal themselves as constantly changing process, because any structure is, at base, process. Yoga is the practice of attending to this process. Yoga returns us to the undivided wholeness and intimate interconnection of reality.

Another way of thinking about the interconnectedness of the mind and body, and of the kośas in particular, is through the myth of Indra's Net. This Indian myth appears in both Hinduism and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. It conceives of the abode of Indra, the Hindu god of space, in which there is a net that

stretches infinitely in all directions. At every intersection of the net there is a jewel so highly polished and perfect that it reflects every other jewel in the net. Each and every jewel in the web is intimately connected with every other jewel so that any change of pattern in the web is replicated throughout every sector and layer of its system. The entire net is interconnected and interdependent. When any jewel in the net is touched, all other jewels in any node are affected. Is speaks to the hidden interconnectedness and interdependency of everything and everyone in the universe.

Let's return to the example of fascia in the annamaya sheath. The collagen and elastin fibers make the sheath of fascia flexible and strong; the elastin gives muscles elasticity and flexibility, while the collagen provides stability. Whether in body or mind, we always find elasticity and structure, pliability and inertia. In the body and mind, we find dynamic stability, which refers to the way these five sheaths create a sense of structure yet are constantly in motion as well as states of regeneration. At one level, something seems fixed in a pattern, and if you look a little deeper, you will find motion. Keep looking into motion and you will again find form. We are always dancing between form and impermanence. Is this not the same as Indra's net?

Think of collagen, which comprises the facia and is also continuous with tendons, ligaments, and muscles. Efficiency and function of all body systems and movements, including the relationship between the connective tissue and muscle, depends on the balance within the myofascial system. And of course, the myofascial system is also in a state of balance with the emotional body, which is also interdependent with the nervous system, immune system, and mind. In other words, we see in the theory of the five sheaths an ecology of interdependence. This ecological, physiological, and psychological approach to the mind-body allows us to see contingency at work. Parts work together, and within parts we find subcycles supported by other subcycles ad infinitum.

Like the image of the net of Indra, the theory of the kośas undoes explanations or assertions of a solid and fixed universe "out there." The image of one jewel reflecting the light of another jewel from the other edge of infinity is something that is difficult for the linear mind to comprehend. But it's actually closer to what the universe is actually like than other images of fixity and linear motion. The fact that all nodes are simply reflections indicates that there is no particular single source point from whence it all arose. Our experience of body occurs through feeling, mind, and perception, and the ability to perceive rests on a body and sense organs that act as media through which the data of perception flows.

Furthermore, the fact that all nodes are simply reflection points of all others implies the illusory nature of appearance. Appearances are thus not reality but a reflection of reality. If all the kośas are like threads of a web, and the unique patterns within each aspect of a human being weave within the kośas, one cannot continue to practice even the physical aspects of yoga postures without at the same time recognizing the psychological and relational aspects of practice as well.

Even mind and consciousness, as categorized in the third kośa, manomaya kośa, the psychological sheath—which includes the mind, feelings, and the processes that organize experience—as well as the fourth kośa, vijñanamaya kośa, the frame responsible for intellect and wisdom, are interconnected.

The final layer of the mind-body is the kośa of ānanda. Ānanda is the felt sense in mind and body that everything is OK just the way it is. Ānanda is the embodiment, even momentarily, of contentment, or bliss. It's much like the feeling of tuning into the breath, even if it is stirred up, and feeling that one part of the breath no matter how small, is completely relaxed. The term *ānanda* comes from the verbal root *nand,* which means "to rejoice." Ānandamaya kośa is the sheath that represents the joy in stillness. Unlike the outer sheaths of muscles or the inner sheaths of emotional patterns and thought, the innermost sheath of ānandamaya kośa is the sheath of perfection. It is similar to the Tantric descriptions of the middle axis of the body— *suṣumnā nadi,* which is empty and stainless like the blue flute played by Kṛṣṇa at Vṛndivan.

Ānandamaya kośa is the layer of pure awareness, which is empty and without the substance of self. It is the selfless self. It is clear and unpolluted, free from avarice and cultural impressions. It can't even be recognized as a thing unto itself. Much like the experience of *mūla bandha* or insight into emptiness, it is untouched. It is free from binding and coming apart, gaining and losing, coming and going. It is interdependent with the other sheaths and always demonstrates the point of stillness around which the other sheaths vibrate. It is the experience of simple awareness uncluttered by fluctuations of the mind, even though it is part of all that which fluctuates (*prakṛti*). Ānandamaya kośa is the experience of awareness free of grasping. It is the mind and body without artifice. Without any special techniques, one can feel this standing still. The posture *samstitihi* literally means "to stand with equal balance." It refers to the balanced interrelation of the five kośas. The emotional body, nervous system, breath, mind, and heart are all in balance with one another.

Restriction in one sheath tends to transmit dysfunction to other parts. This

makes clear the ways in which the kośas interpenetrate one another. You can also think about this in terms of how patterns within one part of the body replicate themselves in other parts. This as a characteristic of fascia and the nature of the whole fascial system.

As long as we are breathing, as long as our fluids are circulating, old structure is being demolished and removed while new material is being imported and built into new body parts. The body is never perfectly still; it is always in dynamic motion. The mind is also a changing thing. But the motion has a sense of stability to it when the sheaths are in balance. Our electrical and chemical systems are constantly informing one another of, and responding to, the latest developments and needs. In addition to these routine processes of renewal and repair there are exceptional items that need taking care of from time to time. Some of these exceptional items we will be aware of, such as a minor cut, a sensitive hamstring, or an insect bite. Others will escape our attention provided we are healthy. One of the qualities of good health is the ability of our self-healing mechanism to take care of an endless list of minor imbalances and repairs without the need to divert our attention. Provided we don't overload our systems, we have the flexibility to accommodate a whole variety of stressors. It is only when our system is stressed or becomes stiff that we start running the risk of our health deteriorating. When this happens problems that should be temporary tend to hang on or become chronic, or we may become very sensitive to substances or energetic influences that would not trouble us when we are healthy.

Think about inflexibility in psychological terms as well. When the mind is unable to hold several viewpoints simultaneously, when it becomes impossible to listen in a conversation, or when we find ourselves clinging to one perspective, we are acting inflexibly. And when the mind is stiff, those mental states are usually accompanied by or give rise to strong emotions. In moments of anger, jealousy, greed, or envy, we find ourselves clinging to a singular viewpoint at the expense of any other perspective. The mind moves in grooves with qualities similar to those of a stiff arm bone in a shoulder socket—tightness, discomfort, and stress. So it is not just the body that becomes more flexible with yoga postures but the mind as well.

The kośas operate within a global ecosystem of mind/body/ecology. It is worth asking and meditating on what sorts of things happen to the larger system of the mind-body that inhibit our flexibility to renew and repair routinely. In the contemporary science of systems theory, it is argued that a healthy system is one that knows how to repair itself. This is the essential quality of a robust system.

Robustness refers not just to the strength of a system but also to its ability to repair itself. In interdependence, the kośas influence and account for all our bodily processes. If one part of the body loses its flexibility, it tends to break down often. A system that breaks down frequently is trying to educate itself. Breakdowns are the way the mind-body sends crucial information to other aspects of the system. It's clear the body and mind want to become stronger and more flexible, if we stop to notice the feedback they're giving. This is where the qualities and functions of the fascial system really start to account for themselves. Fascia has great flexibility, and it fundamentally influences all our bodily processes. If fascia in one part of the body loses its flexibility due to mechanical inhibition or a toxic or malnourished environment, it will likely affect other parts or systems. Similarly, kośa restriction can be of an emotional nature as well. Thus, the five kośas account for the web or matrix that keeps all the systems of the body communicating with one another.

Deepen the breath, with immediate attention, and stay with the breath for a little longer, and all sorts of movements may start to reveal themselves. Emotion may start to surface. This can be frightening but also deeply healing, as repressed emotion is yet another cause of stiffness. Even the mere alteration of thought or attention can facilitate more flexible movement. Attitude and intention of the practitioner creates an atmosphere where a holding pattern feels secure enough to risk the possibility of letting go. As the breath moves, the mind moves. As the mind moves, the nervous system moves. You cannot separate the movements of mind, breath, and body any more than you can take the essence "onion" out of any layer of an onion. Yoga is the node where at least two things meet, and we find such nodes wherever the sheaths come together. But the sheaths are always together, and that is the great paradox. The mind and body are always working with breath in the same way that the present moment is always occurring, whether you are there for it or not.

The elastic nature of the kośas enables them to carry the memory or intelligence of exactly how the body would like to be arranged to enjoy the greatest ease. Every symptom we feel is an attempt at arranging the sheaths of the mind-body in such a way that balance can be regained. Sheaths of the body under tension are always trying to pull the body back to this state of greatest ease. All psychological symptoms, whether anxiety, depression, or even emotional pain, are the psyche's attempt to balance the sheaths of the mind-body process. Although many symptoms do not at first seem to have a purpose, they are almost always attempts at balance, no matter how perverted they seem. The breath and

the body know in full detail and with total accuracy exactly what they need to do, and what assistance they need in order to return to a state of ease.

The kośas teach us that the systems of the human mind and body, like the larger systems in ecology, are open to, and interact with, their environment, and that they can acquire qualitatively new properties throughout their life cycle. This process results in continual evolution. In other words, we are extremely elastic, and what appears on the surface as fixed and closed is actually an impermanent and flexible process. Rather than reducing an entity such as the human mind or body to the properties of its parts or elements (for example, organs or cells), kośa theory focuses on the arrangement of and relations between the parts, which connect them into a whole. In the Vedas, the relationships between the kośas are not just considered in terms of layers but are also thought of as food for one another. The kośas nourish one another.

We are used to dividing the body into parts or looking at our psychological symptoms as somehow separate from the rest of our life. As practitioners, we may take on a physically demanding routine of Hatha Yoga without opening up to the way these practices affect other aspects of our lives. What we need to remember and open to is the fact that we are always activating a larger system, whether we recognize it or not. This is the teaching of Indra's Net. The nature of the mind-body is a whole system and so, just like an ecosystem, a family, a community, we should consider ourselves as an interdependent system.

Yoga challenges us to take a view that would include all the factors in any given situation and examine how they relate to one another as well as how they work as a whole. This requires both flexibility of perspective and focused attention. To deal with a whole system, we can't dismiss anything as irrelevant.

The systems of the body are dynamic; they change, move, and develop. Frozen pictures of how things are supposed to be do us no good. We need to deal with live systems, whatever surprising directions that might take us in. This approach is what we call "beginner's mind." The attitude of a beginner allows us to pay attention to the interactivity of not only the subtle elements of the body or the breath in a movement but also to all eight limbs of practice.

12. Working with the *Kośa*s

Breath wraps itself around the internal structure of the body like ribbons. It wraps but does not bind. It moves but does not stick. It is only the mind that sticks. As easily as the breath enters the body and mind, it leaves. But the body and mind are dependent on the breath. We only know the feel of the body because of the breath, or if we take this a step further, if there were no breath, there would be no body to know.

The breath animates the web of life. We experience this web most effortlessly through breathing. If we break it down physiologically, the heart pumps our blood, but the larger organs, including the stomach, spleen, liver, and kidneys, are sewn to the respiratory diaphragm. This web of connections works perfectly in the pumping and vibrating of the major organs through the movement of the respiratory diaphragm.

An interesting aspect of human physiology is that the respiratory diaphragm also controls the nervous system. The respiratory diaphragm moves up and down like a wave rising and descending, and controls the rhythm of the nervous system particularly in the thoracic spine. In fact, in yoga's model of the physiology of the nervous system, it is said that the nervous system primarily originates in the thoracic spine at the same location that the respiratory diaphragm hooks into the thoracic vertebrae. This is somewhere close to the twelfth thoracic vertebra.

The breath presses the nervous system into rhythm and through that spreads out across the body like waves on the cosmic ocean or roots beneath the surface of the earth. A root structure, a wave pattern, or even a spider's web is a combination of lines and circles with an organic purpose. The breath also follows this logic. The mind and breath interweave just like patterns throughout the vegetable kingdom, as can be seen in the branching of nerves, blood vessels, and other physiological systems. One becomes many through the evolutionary movement from simple to complex.

Like the mind that either spreads out or gets concentrated, or like water in a river that diverts and meets up again, breath, too, moves from the one to the many, from singularity to multiplicity. When the sensation of the breath is felt in the nostrils, it occurs first as a fine and singular line, a thread, or a simple stream coursing through the nostrils. From there it spreads, beginning at the root of the palate where the tongue becomes the throat. It then moves across the shoulder blades and spreads the collarbones away from one another. The inhalation continues as a widening movement across the rib cage, and with close attention one can feel all the bones in the body rotating externally during the inhale and internally during the exhale. Exhaling pulls the ribs close together and inhaling spreads them out again, drawing the wings of the kidneys across the back, wrapping the skin around the side ribs and pulling toward the front midline of the torso.

With awareness and concentration we can not only follow the patterning of the breath but also control it. This first requires being simply mindful with the breath, meaning we watch it closely without interfering. We learn about its structure and patterning as well as its impermanence. But in prāṇāyāma and āsana, we start to manipulate the breath. In prāṇāyāma we stretch the breath, as Richard Freeman says, "like the sun stretches light." Without manipulating and stretching the breath throughout the five sheaths of the body, it will continue to move only according to habituated patterns. When we stretch the breath, the mind follows and is stretched into longer and longer spans of attention, until the mind itself—the seemingly solid, stable mind—dissolves into a stream of momentary perceptions arising and passing away, moment to moment, coming from nowhere and going nowhere, yet continuing in sequence without pause. As the breath arises and falls away it reveals that it and the mind are one. The realization brings the practitioner to a nondualistic state of awareness.

When we study the kośas, confusion can arise if we assume that they refer only to the physical body. It is easy to fall back on the Judeo-Christian binary of a mind split from the body. If we use that framework to superimpose mind over body on the kośa system, it seems like there is a mind that stands outside these five layers of body. But the kośa theory does not come out of this Western philosophy. It cannot be understood with the idea of a mind-body split, because yoga theory finds the mind within the sheaths. The kośas describe a whole human being rather than a mind apart from the layers of the body. One cannot think of the mind working alone or give priority to one kind of consciousness, because mind, breath, body, and stillness are of one piece. The kośas could never be truly

independent, because one aspect cannot operate without interactions with all the others. If mind is treated as something apart from the kośas, then they become nothing more than an elaborate way of talking about the reductive bifurcation of body and mind.

Many traditional texts make it clear that physicality can encompass an entire range of material conditions both inside and outside our minds and bodies. It includes not only the sense organs but also their objects: colors and shapes, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. It can also be used to discuss and comprehend such disparate things as space, gender, heat, nutriment, decay, impermanence, and so on. The functioning, decay, and impermanence of the kośas allow us to see and think of the "unfindable," in the mind, body, and self. Using this framework enables us to see a larger, richer picture of a seamless, dynamic process of experience where not only the mind-body split but also the subject-object split dissolves. Learning to experience things in terms of these five kośas erodes the limited and limiting sense of being just "a mind inside a body inside a world."

The kośas are not layers surrounding "me" nor are they events happening to "me." We may ask where the "I" is among these sheaths but find no answer. When we try to locate a solid "I" within the frame of the kośas, we are frustrated. These questions and searches are fruitless. Since the kośas interpenetrate one another in a seamless flow, we cannot find something permanent or essential and lasting within that. This frustration is experienced in mind and body as feeling blocked. Having configured "self," "mind," "body," and "world" as discrete things in our conception of reality, we feel that each is cut off from the others, thus blocking the flow of life. This leads to degrees of alienation, in which we feel out of touch with our body, our emotions, other people, and the environment. We may have moments in life—such as when we are one with the natural world, making love, creating art, playing with a child, ingesting psychotropic drugs, or sitting in meditation—when the blocks feel temporarily dissolved. But as soon as the mind—or more specifically the "I"-making function of the mind (*ahaṇkāra*)—comes in, the blocks return, and this leads back to feelings of separateness and alienation. However, we are not trapped in a destiny outside of our control, and it is the kośas that help us see that all attempts to create permanence in a dazzling and unstable world will only bring separateness and discontent.

Our subjective experience always appears on the surface as a "me" that has experiences "inside" or "outside" a somewhat-stable self. However yoga practice reveals time and again that what seems like an experience belonging to "me" is

simply the contact of perception and stimulus. And the person that perceives, along with that which is perceived, is changing, unpredictable, and unstable. If I like what I experience, I try to repeat it (*raga*), and if I do not like it, I try to avert it (*dveṣa*). It is this continual push and pull that gives us the feeling of being a real self.

When I feel a bone and create a theory that the bone is mine, I give legitimacy both to what I perceive and to the self that is perceiving. However, all that we perceive, feel, think are simply kośas—in this example the first and third—coming into contact with each other. This moment of contact is just one in a seamless flow of changing and, paradoxically, impersonal conditions.

Is there a self that inhabits this mind and body? How can we find it? How do we know it is there? Where is its location?

A personality or psychology convinced of the self as primary leads to a personality embedded in existential disorientation. Since feeling like a separate self solidifies both subject and object—“me” and what is either “outside” or “inside” me—one feels stuck in a compartmentalized world. A separate self sets up the conditions for addiction, because all addictive patterns stem from the flip-flop back and forth between attachment, aversion, and the consequence of these two reactionary patterns, namely, feeling like a self.

Most practitioners view the kośas as a convenient way of describing the interconnection of mind and body. However, the kośas are also a theoretical construct through which we can see the turning cycle of saṁsāra, that is, conditioned existence. But the kośas are not separate compartments. They are interpermeating forms moving about within and around one another. The more obsessively we cling to “self,” the more we reinforce a compartmentalized perception of reality that was formed out of fear and existential confusion. The very insistence on being “someone” blocks the possibility of freedom in being no one. As soon as “someone” is born, the anguish of torment, grief, pain, depression, and anxiety is inevitable.[1]

After looking deeply into the nature and operation of the kośas, it no longer makes sense to commit to a view of reality or even continually construct a life in which we insist on a self that exists independent of the kośas. To do so would only maintain that feeling of a self inside a mind inside a body inside a world. These attempts to ensure the survival of a self inside a mind—strategies that are ingrained and deeply unconscious—only create anxiousness and a self-centered mode of perception. Longing to be someone keeps us self-absorbed and

intensifies the false subject-object split.

Patañjali says that the mind and body and even awareness are *svarūpa śūnya* (empty of self-form). The word *śūnyatā* derives from the root *shu*, which interestingly enough means "swollen." Something swollen is something beyond original measure, boundless, and by definition, beyond fragmentation and compartmentalization. This is the heart of the kośa theory: by using the lens of these sheaths that make up mind and body, we begin to see that the sheaths, like the jewels in Indra's net, penetrate one another, are formed by one another, and though singular in one way, are from a larger view part of everything else in existence.

There is nothing to cling to. Not holding on to any one thing, even the need to be a self, allows the yoga practitioner to access an unmeasured reality that shows what the process of being actually is: a seamless part of a changing whole. There is only consciousness and its objects appearing and disappearing, a moving gyroscope of mind, body, and world, impossible to disentangle, as they are all made of one another.

13. *Saṁskāra*s

WEBS OF MIND AND BODY

THE OFT-QUOTED second line of the second chapter of the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpika* reminds us that when the breath moves through the body with agitation, the mind, too, becomes agitated, but then this also means that as the breath becomes still so too does the mind. "When the breath is in motion the mind is in motion. The breath being without motion, the mind becomes motionless."[1] The breath, mind, and body work together, as they are inseparable.

In our exploration of the five kleṣas and the five kośas, we have looked at the strategies we use, consciously and unconsciously, that cause us to contract from that which is unpleasant or impermanent in order to protect ourselves. This contracting, aversion, or pulling has profound psychological effects (the six poisons), which also replicate through the living body. Our misperception and misidentification with our experience are great burdens. In the last chapters we looked at how perception can pick up anything in the field of awareness and use it to create a story about the self. Now we will look at how these patterns manifest energetically.

Our attention is rarely able to stay undivided for long periods. It is a challenge to stay with the experience of breathing or silence for any length of time. We are so accustomed to the innumerable complexities of living that we are largely unaware of the subtleties of breathing, the simplicity of awareness, the felt sense of the mind and body in stillness. This is one of the reasons we practice yoga postures.

We practice postures to learn about waking up the intelligence of the body, and then we also cultivate the opposite, that is, learning how to observe the body and mind while leaving both alone. Yoga practices are constructed quite differently depending on the school or the culture. Each will give some aspect of the practice more or less emphasis. But regardless of what limb, stage, or process one is pursuing as their chosen path, most share a focus on the dance between stretching mind and body outside historical parameters and self-imposed narratives in order

to settle mind and body in complete stillness.

The term we use for "posture," *āsana,* literally means "to sit." Most scholars and practitioners translate *āsana* to refer to sitting in meditation or being in a meditative position such as *padmāsana* (Lotus pose) or *virāsana* (Hero's pose). In the context of Patañjali's *Yoga-Sutra*, however, the term is used in a more figurative sense as meaning "to sit with." A yoga posture is an opportunity to "sit with" what arises from moment to moment with acceptance and patience, steadiness and ease. Patañjali states that the practice of āsana leads to the dissolution of duality, where the sense of "me" and "my body" dissolve into each other, leaving only felt experience without a sense of a separate self having the experience. Like the twilight time when the coming night and the conclusion of day collapse into one another, or the feeling of swimming in perfect summer water where the difference between warm and cool has dissapeared, a movement experienced in practice can be so fully executed that one feels no separation.

Contemplating āsana psychologically turns a yoga pose into a tool of awareness, an opportunity for liberation. It also broadens our understanding of āsana to include not just practicing a headstand or backbend but also toward tasks like washing dishes, sitting with a relationship, walking, sleeping, and talking. Āsana can permeate the rest of our day, our entire life for that matter, and give us access to a more spacious sense of being. The form of the pose is secondary to what that pose is orienting the mind-body toward.

Since contemporary āsana practice is the most common door through which people come into contact with yoga, it is usually the first limb of practice. Whether or not this has always been the case is up for debate, especially since Indian historical material on the history of āsana is quite conjectural in nature. In Sanskrit texts that describe āsana in more detail than Patañjali's *Yoga-Sutra*, we usually hear of a six-limbed practice that begins with āsana rather than the first two limbs of ethics. Even though there is no mention of ethics, āsana is always considered a practice that brings practitioners to the place of nonseparation.

For many of us, the movements of body and breath bring us into contact with habitual and often unconscious patterns of movement, thought, and feeling. When one first begins yoga practice, it takes only a short period of time to learn about the ways in which the body is conditioned: we can extend our hamstrings only so far, the breath is deeper on one side of the torso than the other, the spine is inflexible in certain motions, and the mind is distracted during certain parts of the breath cycle. Soon after recognizing our physical limits, we also notice how these

limits give rise to preferences—we like poses that give us pleasure and lean away from postures that cause us difficulty. But these difficulties are not just markers of physical limitation, they also show us what the mind does with that limitation. This is a crucial point: duḥkha is self-generated. Difficult sensation in the body is not necessarily a form of suffering. It is what the mind adds to a challenging experience that creates dissatisfaction and stress. For example, when deeper patterns of uncomfortable sensations build up in the body, say in the hips, the mind becomes impatient. Impatience is a sign that we are having a hard time staying present with sensations in the body. The sensations are acceptable as phenomenal experience, but the mind and emotions have preferences that arise alongside those sensations, creating a gap between what are actually arising as phenomena and what we are trying to do with those experiences. That gap is called *duḥkha.* The mind follows sensations in the body with preference, interpretation, and conceptualization, described by Patañjali as *citta vṛtti* (fluctuations of consciousness).

Approaching āsana practice psychologically takes us right to the heart of sensations arising and passing away as well as to how the mind contracts and builds around those sensations. It's a practice that cuts through the armor of preferences built into our psychophysical makeup. Yoga postures stretch us beyond these preferences. Since the body is always responsive, we move within its envelope in order to cultivate an unrehearsed immediacy of contact and knowing—action without waste.

Because different yoga poses set up various patterns of breathing and physiological action, postures are invitations into the psychological and physiological webs that form the matrix of the mind-body. Posture sequences open up different layers and movements and thus work on the sheaths of mind and body in distinct ways. Traditional posture sequences create balance in the mind-body, because postures complement one another by alternating between stretching and stilling the breath.

If we only practice poses that reinforce our zones of comfort, we end up with a yoga practice that moves prāṇa only in habitual ways. And if we are used to overexertion or hyperactivity, then the pranic patterns in the body will be reinforced in this way also. So finding the balance between steadiness and ease in yoga postures also requires playing with the limits of our physical sensibilities, because all our sense organs are conditioned in habitual ways. Some habits are harmless, while others can do great damage. Some we develop ourselves, while others have been passed down from our ancestors. We may find ourselves like

tourists in our own body, looking at archaic monuments to some built-up self-image. These tendencies in both mind and body are called "saṁskāras," and they influence the way we think and move, the way we act and breathe, and even the basic conditioning of the respiratory system, nervous system, immune function, and all the subtle operating systems of the body. We can also think of saṁskāras as latent impressions, predispositions, webs, imprints, inherent tendencies, molds, or internal grooves.

The term comes from *sam* (to come together) and *kr* (action). The term *saṁskāra* is interchangeable with the common Sanskrit term *vāsanā,* which also refers to predispositions from past impressions or actions. These karmic memory traces are primarily unconscious residue from previous experience. Every new moment contributes to these traces, like friction to leather. Karma is like an accumulation of scratches. In traditional Indian philosophy, these latent impressions that predispose the mind and body in specific ways are somewhat mysterious. It was interesting that in a meeting with Pattabhi Jois at Marpa House in Boulder, he brushed off questions about alignment technique in yoga postures if he felt that the student was striving in an egotistic way. If someone asked him how to achieve the next backbend sequence, he would just say, "Next lifetime." This was a joke, but it also served as a way of setting ambition in context. He was much more interested in talking about the internal process of yoga than he was the physical details of postures, even though most students were asking about exactly these physical details.

Physical practice is an internal process when we pay close attention to what the breath and mind are doing in any given moment. Saṁskāras, as conditioned patterns, influence the way we perceive and organize experience. And since everything conditioned is from the past, saṁskāras prevent a fresh meeting with the present moment because they inform the way that we meet, organize, alter, and elaborate upon that moment. The saṁskāras are like mental, emotional, and physical biases within the mind-body. The ongoing actions of body, speech, and mind that spring from the interaction between given data and the habits of the saṁskāras only reinforce the saṁskāras. This is the cause-and-effect model of karma as it operates in mind and body, making the saṁskāras psychophysical manifestations of karma. The karmic effects in mind and body are like seeds that grow into particular modes of perception or particular ways of acting.

It is helpful to think of the saṁskāras as seeds. Whatever we have sewn in the past will affect what we do and how we feel in the present in positive or negative ways. Think of the poisons that Pattabhi Jois laid out—desire, anger, delusion,

greed, envy, and sloth. Our unconscious habits of acting on those feelings reinforce those very energies. We can understand the psychological and physical makeup and range of the saṁskāras as conditioned patterns of mind and body. But we can also conceive of the saṁskāras as fields of consciousness. They are simultaneously the seed and the ground for growing, or to use a more negative metaphor, the symptoms and the disease. We can work with the saṁskāras better if we understand that positive saṁskāras germinate based on positive mental states, and negative saṁskāras grow in negative mental conditions. The conditions of the ground influence what will grow from it. Like a gardener's toil, our work is to cultivate the field of the saṁskāras in such a way that we monitor which karmic seeds find root and in what way they grow.

Context and Release

The saṁskāras are predispositions or contexts that the mind and body supply in each new moment of experience. When we have an experience, say of a sunset, we try to allow the sunset to reach us, to make an impression on us. But we tend to do that only by supplying a context within which we can receive the experience. We label the phenomenon as "sunset," compare it to other sunsets we've experienced, and frame it in language. These contexts are base-structures of understanding. They are preconceptions or prejudices. We select contexts by choice—they are not given, nor are they intrinsic to the experience itself. A direct experience of a sunset or the energetic flow of a posture is inherently empty of conceptualizing, empty of meaning. The scholar of myth Joseph Campbell once said that we are not trying to find the meaning in life but rather a deep experience of it. The comical thing is that when we let go of the constant drive to find meaning, things become more meaningful.

The process of experience, then, goes something like this. To begin with, a new experience enters us. It is without context. But because we know something about what the experience might be, based on preceding moments or past experience, we believe we have a small collection of contexts that might be appropriate for whatever is arising. When the new data meets us, we take it in only partially, as it comes through the filters of the sense media and the mind. The sense organs and the mind quickly decide on the context that fits it best. The experience then seems completed by the context we give to it, but this is actually only a partial experience, because it is already an interpreted moment. Patañjali calls this cycle

saṁyoga, or the misapprehension of an experience in context with a fresh experience that has no context, because context is never built in to experience.

Having an experience—whether of a sunset, a yoga posture, or even another person—without creating a context seems at first impossible. How are we to vacate prior experiences in order to have a fresh one? This is the psychological conundrum that Patañjali points out in his description of āsana. The problem is that we base our sense of self on these past experiences and alter all new information through that previously determined sense of self. We feel wedded to context because it reinforces our sense of self. So, how can one experience something if the precondition for the experience is to already understand what it is about? This is a paradox. We insist on being prepared, yet come always to face the fact that nothing is more invisible than the next moment. In that case, all we have is this moment, which is without context. Context is always our addition.

Contending with this paradox means moving through it and recognizing that we are always shaping our experience, mostly unconsciously, with the grooves of the mind and body, which in turn reinforce themselves, because the more that the mind and breath flow through conditioned grooves, the deeper those grooves become. When we are in a deep groove, it is hard to see a way out, or sometimes to even know that we are actually in a groove. However, when we begin to learn about our conditioning, we can see these patterns and how they limit our experience. Then we can be open to the alteration of these grooves that the present moment requires of us. Discovery is always a process of redefinition.

14. *Prāṇa*

ENERGETIC FLOW

PRĀṆA IS A mysterious word most commonly applied to the act of breathing. However, the term actually refers to something much more universal. Traditionally it is used to describe life energy as a whole and the way energy vibrates, circulates, and forges new pathways. Prāṇa is the energy that animates life, and in human form prāṇa is most perceptible as the breath. When we go even further into the breath itself, we see that it is made up of an infinite number of qualities, called *vāyuu*s, or “winds.” Like a full-color spectrum, there are many layers to the breath, with currents and subcurrents, texture and weave, and as one follows, feels, and gets to know the breath as a form of devotional practice, the breath reveals its many winds.

The winds are like currents of energy, and when we tune in to them, we see they are made up of perception, thought, the nervous system, cognition, and all activities of mind and body. Yoga practitioners, when sensitive to the internal currents of the body, use these currents to gather information about the functioning of mind and body. These winds of prāṇa are the fundamental processes of human existence. Energetic sensing brings us into contact with the subtle winds that move within us and govern perception and action.

We can translate prāṇa as “life energy” or “breath.” It flows within meridians that spread throughout the body, and these meridians in turn are conditioned by the saṁskāras. Saṁskāras, as explored in the previous chapter, are internal structures that inform the way in which prāṇa flows through the mind-body and therefore the way we perceive, move, think, and act. Most lineages teach that these habitual grooves come from three sources: nature, nurture, and past lives. *Nature* refers to the biological blueprint that we come into the world with. *Nurture* refers to the way in which that blueprint is formed in its meeting with environment and culture. *Past lives* is an essential category, because not all patterns in mind and body fit neatly into the two-category system of nature and nurture. Robert Wright, author of *The Moral Animal,* acknowledges that there is

much the current dominant systems cannot account for. He writes,

> Of course, you can argue with the proposition that all we are is knobs and tunings, genes and environment. You can insist that there's… something more. But if you try to visualize the form this something would take, or articulate it clearly, you'll find the task impossible, for any force that is not in the genes or the environment is outside physical reality, as we perceive it. It's beyond scientific discourse. This doesn't mean it doesn't exist.[1]

Whether you believe in past lives or not, it is clear that certain tendencies and traits people inherit require more than either nature or nurture explanations.

The practice of yoga invites us into this domain between—literally right in between—the psychological and physiological components of conditioned existence. As you can see from investigation of the saṁskāras, you cannot talk about a psychological holding pattern without talking about physiology, and you can't explore physical holding patterns without looking at psychological grooves, because every saṁskāra is composed of and manifests the mental, emotional, energetic, and physical elements that make up the matrix of the mind-body.

Anyone who has practiced has noticed how in yoga postures certain physical sensations bring with them specific mental formations and emotions. As we sit in a pose and think, we can become agitated. Past impressions and associations are always lying dormant in our bodies, and practice will stir up emotions and memories alongside physical sensations. History is always falling in our lap. Our task in these moments is to attend to the truth of what is happening, to the immediacy of our experience, rather than what we think is happening. This teaches us how to handle the events of experience with more clarity.

We live in a culture that pressures and conditions people to endlessly seek more and more pleasure, on the one hand, and to deny our present physical awareness on the other. The culture is full of messages that say that gratification for every sense organ will lead to happiness. But also we are told to get through the day, through the pain of a workout, in order to enjoy the abstract pleasure of a certain look or identity. The psychological and physical effect of all this is not just restlessness but also the clogging up of the mind and sense organs. With all this sensory overload we are unable to take in anything with clarity. Life becomes about producing and consuming, running toward and away.

Therefore, just taking up a practice of simple movements and attending to the breath goes a long way in returning the mind-body to a natural pace. By following and deepening the practice we can gradually begin, sense organ by sense organ, to open up the channels and eventually the heart. We can gradually clear the perceptual faculties of all this excess. When we can breathe again, we can be silent. And everything is crafted out of silence.

Each inhale is born out of silence, and every exhale returns us to it. Thoughts and sensations arise from this and pass away back to nowhere. Or, perhaps this nowhere is actually everywhere. I always begin sitting meditation, āsana practice, and also prāṇāyāma by sitting silently and feeling the sense of body and breath occurring without interference. It's hard not to interfere, but if we can give ourselves space from the ceaseless distractions, something arises. Mind and body settle themselves by being left alone, like a flock of birds noiselessly settling themselves in a tree.

The practice of yoga postures is a practice of prāṇāyāma; both are rituals of attention animated by the currents of the breath. Āsana and prāṇāyāma practice have to do with following the flow of the breath and energy within the body. Once some concentration and ease are established, we notice where energy moves and where it is interrupted or blocked. In practice we give attention to the patterns and disruptions of the breath, the nervous system, the heart rate, and the feeling tone in the muscles, fascia, and so on. All of these objects of awareness become objects of meditation (*dhāraṇā*) and eventually opportunities for absorption (*dhyāna*).

As we deepen our focus on the quality of breath as it moves through the constantly changing configurations of mind-body, we come to see that there are two streams we are working with: a stream of breathing and a stream of mental formations. These two streams can be thought of as *prāṇa* (breath, life energy) and *citta* (mind, imagination, perception). We are trying to bring these two streams closer and closer together. The paradox is that the two streams are always fundamentally intertwined, but our distracted mind keeps pulling them apart. The material and mental are two aspects of the same movement but we have to work to accept this intertwining.

Yoga postures teach us how to perceive with ever-greater levels of clarity. At first we breathe in, synchronizing the mind, body, and breath, then we breathe out. Eventually we begin to feel and even intuit dozens, if not hundreds, of universes in the breath. With clarity of attention, any feelings that arise, even if

unpleasant, do not automatically become moments of dissatisfaction, nor do they unfold into stories of “me.” Human experience is always carving out a world through limited means of perception, but it is precisely our limited means that open us up to the world. When we notice our drifting attention span or contraction in a shoulder socket, we at once notice our limited mobility and awareness. We pave a path out of the conditioning simply by bringing awareness to it. Remember that Pattabhi Jois did not go into details about how to work with the six poisons. Instead he treated them as symptoms and said, in few words, that if one wants to work with the symptoms of duḥkha, one begins not with the symptom itself but the five kleṣas and how they interact with one another in sequence.

In reflecting on Pattabhi Jois’s suggestion, I have come to see the wisdom in the advice to just witness the underlying patterns of attachment and aversion that give rise to a symptom rather than pursuing the elimination of the symptom itself. Our task is to move through the symptom toward the factors that give rise to the symptom in the first place.

Even on a collective level, we must realize that greed, anxiety, depression, and even anger are not dealt with appropriately if we try simply to eliminate them from our awareness. Anxiety in a culture often points to where change needs to happen. So in a collective sense, anxiety is not something to eliminate but rather to recognize as a symptom of something larger. Painful sensation often teaches us the difference between feeling and reaction to feeling. Pain is an inevitable part of human aging, so we must look at and listen to it rather than running from it. Fear is also important—an animal without fear is a dead animal.

We shouldn’t be too quick to try to eliminate or muffle a symptom; instead we should try to understand where it’s coming from. The process of nirodha is one of freeing obstructions, making space, getting to the bottom of things. *Nirodha* comes into English literally as “root,” “radish,” or “radical,” which connote getting to the bottom of something. For Pattabhi Jois, the kleṣas bring us to the root cause of a symptom. This serves to map out the landscape of lived experience, which, when seen through the lens of the kleṣas, is shown to be always a constructed experience. This is a phenomenologically based psychology. Instead of starting with a diagnosis or even a creation myth, we start with awareness that there is no situation in which everything is settled. Even when we do finally accept or let go of something, we don’t always have an explanation for why or how it came to be in the first place. That is why we begin in the body. We begin our investigation of symptoms of anguish, torment, and dissatisfaction by

asking: what is it that is present in this experience in the present moment?

If yoga is the science of studying the way we perceive and construct our experience in order to bring about a fundamental shift in perception, we need to begin with an idea of just how knowing operates. The way we know anything is not independent of the body, so waking up our pathways of perception means waking up the intelligence of mind and body. Not only do we have personal habits in the way we construct our world, we of course have personal habits of movement in the body. If the practice of Hatha Yoga is internally focused on these layers of mind and body, we come to study the way we know what we know and how ways of knowing and ways of moving are intimately linked. Formal practice matures as awareness turns inward. It does not grow through constant attention to superficial form. If we attend only to outward form, āsana practice becomes another field in which we act out the habitual demands of an unconscious self.

Many contemporary yoga practitioners and teachers find this out the hard way. Many people begin āsana practice because they are drawn to the physical aesthetic and great though surface benefits of the practice. And there is nothing particularly wrong with that. However, when we lock on to a technique as the mode of improving our practice, the practice can have the inverse effect. After some time of moving along in this manner the practice can become nothing more than the continual refinement of technique. The technique becomes confused with the experience of yoga, to say nothing of the other limbs. In this way, much like a virtuoso musician who has no experience, no character, and no soul, the practice may look outwardly beautiful but lack the very core that makes the practice deeply transformative and worthwhile. Teachers and students of yoga may indeed have authentic openings, but from the perspective of an eight-limbed practice there is work to do on many fronts. Practice must infiltrate all aspects of life and awareness without exception. The breath is seen to be the morning wind; our ideas, the greening of a landscape; compassion, the fertile blooming realization of our practice.

The habits of attachment and self-centeredness are relentless, and unless we continue to practice and move persistently beyond our favorite techniques, the habitual patterns of mind and body will continue to act themselves out. If we can return to practice day after day with more wisdom, we can see technique as something instrumental rather than an end in and of itself. In this regard practice is like a musical instrument; it is there to manipulate sound but is not ultimately the source of sound itself. When we go deep inside the sound of the breath as a

whole, or when we listen carefully to the variations of the inhalation and exhalation, we are looking directly into the nature of the universe as it presents itself in that particular instance of experience.

Feeling the subtle movements of the breath in the body and listening to these movements year after year has taught me how to pay attention to the way that the arising and passing of everything that moves through awareness happens and will continue to happen in a seamless flow. It has also taught me to view the world in terms of universal changes of events and processes. The breath is an integral part of the web of life, and studying the breath without being apart from it puts me in that web. I am nothing other than the web of life.

When I transcend the habits of dualism and fragmentation, it's as if I become what I am observing. I feel the breath so clearly in the pelvic floor that the whole experience opens up before me, and I experience what is occurring as a process of nature, the movement of butterfly wings, an ongoing linking of form and formlessness. The best way to describe this is as intimacy with the flow of all existence, in which the body and mind become unsurveyable, not apart from anything. When my mind finally settles into the full cycle of the breath, it feels as if this is the ultimate purpose for being in the world. Nothing is clearer.

15. Body in Mind

HOW DO WE INTERRUPT the distracted and overly conceptual tendency of the mind in order to get concentrated? First of all, the spiritual practice of yoga is a journey of letting go, so it is important to always reconsider what we are letting go of.

Posture practice is a way of noticing our tendency toward attachment (*raga*) and aversion (*dveṣa*) that causes us to repeat the patterns of not seeing things as they are (*avidyā*). All of our problems and feelings of dissatisfaction and suffering are caused by fixation and clinging—latching on to things and not being able to release them. This latching on is a form of distraction, and it occurs within all the sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and mind). We locate and cling on to sounds, forms, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions.

The first step in the process of releasing these patterns of distraction occurs when we experience the body and mind as process rather than a substance. A yoga posture is a wonderful way of feeling things as they are through direct contact with energy. We notice how certain patterns of energy are difficult to stay with, but with patience and immediate awareness we stay. Learning to keep focused is effectively a process of learning to be free, because when we let go of something, we become free of it.

Letting go in the practice of yoga postures occurs when there is enough concentration present that we can slip into the conditions that we call "yoga posture." A posture is a label we place on an experience of form, but beyond that label, the form reveals itself organically. You can consider this when you learn new alignment techniques in a posture. Watch and ask what changes when you try to feel new instruction from the inside out rather than trying to superimpose a new image onto the body from the outside in.

Patañjali describes āsana practice as a tool for liberating the kleṣa activities. The Tantric traditions, most notably the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpika,* describe āsana as a means of liberating the practitioner by seeing the nonduality of mind and body. In both traditions this nonduality becomes detectable when the mind and breath become still enough to recognize that they are two sides of the same coin. Since perception, breath, and body are always breaking up and continually fluctuate

together, we cannot pin our stories of reality on any of them.

Whatever expectation we lay on our experiences—wanting this to turn out in previously determined ways—is always bound to come apart when the mind, breath, and body change. If the mind, breath, and body are eternally changing, and if we can barely define their location or existence, they cannot be taken as self. Once we sense this, letting go occurs naturally, because it is the only option when clinging has failed. Raga and dveṣa come to an end when we see that the mind, breath, and body, as well as all objects of awareness (*ālambana*) are boundless, ownerless, and lacking inherent substantiality, their coming and going contingent on conditions that likewise come and go.

When we give up our notions and labels of yoga postures, we relinquish our fixation on the solidity of concepts: posture, body, leg, arm, bone, and so on. Experience no longer has to be "this" or "that." Thinking of "this or "that" binds us to a particular mode of existence that is conceptual and built on linguistic association and memory rather than on contact with the real. Patañjali warns of this in one of the opening paragraphs of the *Yoga-Sutra,* where he states, *"Śabda-jñānānupāti vastu-śūnya vilkapaḥ* (Conceptualization derives from linguistic knowledge, not contact with real things)."[1]

Notice how the word *śūnya* (empty) appears here to denote that the substance or object is empty of the linguistic and conceptual scaffolding we construct around it. Emptiness is so hard to describe in words, not because it so sophisticated or subtle but precisely because it is so simple and basic to our nature. Often what is closest to us is what we have the hardest time noticing.

What Patañjali is saying is that we tend to experience the body as a fabrication or concept. We look down below our hips and say, "leg," "thigh," "knee," and "foot." These labels give us the feeling that there is something there—a thing—and from this concept we then behave as if that thing was truly there. Yet concepts, Patañjali suggests, have no real existence of their own, as they are empty of self-form (*svarūpa śūnya*). Even disposition is a malleable construction. Nothing is cast in stone.

We are so used to relating to our ideas of body and concepts of being in the body that sometimes we confuse our relationship with the concept as relationship with the body. But concept and embodiment are not the same thing. Concepts exist in our minds. So we need to be careful not to stop at the level of concept but instead move forward in the direction of concentration beyond linguistic knowledge.

Take the notion that our body actually exists in the mind. When I first started practicing yoga, the teacher was fond of saying that my body is all in my mind. At first this seemed ridiculous, as I had feelings in my body that seemed independent from my thoughts. But then I began to discover, especially during intense āsana practice, that there were certain sensations I allowed myself to feel and others that, when they occurred, made me want to run away as fast as possible.

In our culture the body is forced to get used to sitting in a chair. Because of this we develop tight hips, the femur bones don't rotate as they should, and the belly falls into the pubic bone. This mean that when we begin practicing hip-opening poses, for example, we are brought into contact with sensations that we are not used to feeling, and those sensations have corresponding emotions and thought trains. One thought links up with another and another and another. This is why we get distracted, because thoughts are glued to one another with memory, association, and habit. We can easily get stuck in ideas like, "There is sensation in my leg. I do not like it. My leg hurts. I need to move. I am not flexible. Will I always be like this? The person next to me is so limber. I am not good at anything," and so on.

I once had a teacher who would always come from across the room and adjust me during *kapotāsana* (Pigeon pose), a pose that brought up a great deal of tension both in my hip flexors and in my mind. She would lean over and say, "Your body is in your mind, Michael." I would close my eyes and take a deep breath and refocus. Slowly I began to see that my experience of the body was made up of my ideas about the body and that when my ideas about my body were challenged, I was not present at all, just lost in preferences and stories. The well-timed words of this teacher created a shock to the ahaṇkāra—the "I"-maker, or as I like to translate it, "the storyteller." These interruptions temporarily paralyzed the continuity of the narrative "I like" and "I don't like" and opened up a space of spontaneity. This space is not just one that leaves room for spontaneity; it is also open to creative and immediate awareness, because when our stories of how things should be are suspended, awareness of how things actually are has space to move.

I have borrowed from this teacher this shock tactic, both while I practice and while I teach. While they do not in themselves provide a final crossover into the territory of nirodha, they do provide a brief and immediate glimpse into unconditioned awareness, which we can call "the present moment." This is because all perceptions are misperception by virtue of our conditioning. That is not to say that perception is wrong or that misperception is bad but that trying to

fix an idea in one place doesn't serve the process any more than it serves the boundlessness of reality.

Sometimes when practicing on my own, I use techniques to help interrupt the ongoing conversation of "me" that I normally call "thinking." One of these methods is asking questions such as who is breathing, or who is moving? Relating to the body is like a dance, and it takes time before our awareness is focused enough to arrive fully in any given movement. The body has its own intelligence, as does the breath. Yoga postures teach us to let the thinking and conceptual mind give back to the body what is naturally in the body's domain.

What keeps us out of the body is thinking of ourselves as selves—as the central players around whom thoughts, feelings, and movements pivot. But we must continually be reminded, or remind ourselves, that this is a myth. Since no thing has any inherent, essential, or abiding nature, there is really nothing that separates us from our bodies or each other. Every barrier is one we create through storytelling. We are not independent, separately locatable beings moving through an objective world. Rather we are all-pervasive and interconnected unknowables. We exist here and nowhere. Who practices yoga postures? Who breathes? An interruption to the linguistic narrative that accompanies almost every experience can occur whenever we let go of clinging to ideas and get concentrated in action. This concentration leads to absorption where action occurs, but there is no sense of a "me" taking action. A posture is practiced simply for the sake of the posture. Yoga practice is not about true and false, inside or outside—it just means waking up to the inherent interconnectedness of reality. This is clear when one is clear.

You can actually watch the whole process of stories of the self arising out of clinging to sensations in the body without jumping out of it. It is possible at any moment to just relax back and watch, even when inside a painful, intense, or chaotic moment. There is always room to witness. This is as true for the intense moments as it is for the ones that might seem dull or simple. Because actually if you look at experience, such a small percentage of it is either painful or pleasant—most is actually fairly neutral. It is the neutral, plain, common moments of experience that we also want to tune in to—stepping, lifting an arm, feeling a breath, and tilting the gaze. It is hard to stay in neutral feeling tones, especially in such an entertainment-based culture. Moving the body and being present in intentional movement teaches us how to receive experience on its own terms.

When you see all these thoughts about body and self just as thoughts about body and self, they lose their potency. When you see a pattern clearly, it loses its

dynamic force. It is almost like looking into another person's eyes. You look into the eyes of another, and the mind fills with all kinds of ideas and emotions. It's hard to hold the gaze. But when the mind stops running away creating stories, then you just release the averting gaze back into the still gaze. Then you can see and also be seen.

Likewise, when we recognize a pattern as a pattern, we release it simply by the fact that it has been seen. "Seeing" denotes that it doesn't have a grip on us anymore, because there is an expanded space. This space, called "nirodha," is much like a force field or a creative energy that is born when the *vṛtti* is seen as it is. Much like when you let go of a habitual addiction, you discover you have more energy for new endeavors, because you are no longer bound by repetitive and unconscious patterns. As we push or hold on, we create a self—a structure or edifice that makes us feel embedded in something. But the self is not unified—like the breath, it comes and goes with experience.

16. Letting Go

ĀSANA AND MEDITATION INTERTWINED

HOW DO WE GO beyond likes and dislikes, beyond the dichotomies our minds are always creating? We do so by letting go of clinging—even the most subtle clinging—to ideas of self. When we lose the sense of a separate self that comes with habits and preferences, we become one with everything. We practice Serpent (*bhujaṅga*) and we become a serpent. We practice Eagle (*garuḍa*) and we become an eagle. We practice Heron pose (*kraunca*) and we become a heron. We practice in full connection with the earth (*pṛthvī*) and we become Earth. When we let go, the nondual, united nature that we call "yoga" comes forth to correct our wayward distractions and misperceptions. Out of the realization of a holistic and integrated reality, of which we are only a part, sensitivity, devotion, and love burst forth.

> "Fetch me from over there a fruit of the Nyagrodha tree."
>
> "Here is one, sir."
>
> "Break it."
>
> "It is broken, sir."
>
> "What do you see there?"
>
> "The seeds, almost infinitesimal."
>
> "Break one of them!"
>
> "It is broken, sir."
>
> "What do you see?"
>
> "Nothing, sir."
>
> The father said: "My son, that subtle essence which you do not perceive there, of that very essence this great Nyagrodha tree exists. Believe it, my son, that that is the subtle essence—in that all things have their

existence. That is the truth. That is the self. And you, Svetaketu, you are that."[1]

This exercise in nondual teaching comes from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad.* It once again reminds us that it is only the grooves of perception and our accompanying concepts that keep us from being eagles, herons, trees, or ocean tides. Yoga returns us to spontaneous meditation, which is actually a nonmeditation, a practice that moves us beyond technique. In other words, we are not trying to meditate or even trying to practice. We are tuning in to the naturally existing state of meditation, which is full engagement with what actually is. Yoga postures teach us how to fully embody the ever-changing flow of life that goes on seemingly without beginning or end. If we see things in this way, then we gain insight into *vinyasa*—the sequences of movements of thought, breath, and mind. In other words, when we practice always and without end, we see that whatever arises in body, heart, and mind whether it be greed, anger, jealousy, laziness, boredom is just another aspect of the ever-flowing moment. Patañjali names this *dharma megha samādhi.*

Practically, this means our task is to study what is arising from moment to moment in order to become familiar with patterns, much in the same way that we can regard a succession of stills that run one after another as frames of a filmstrip. There are passing patterns as well as repetitious ones (in movement, thought, speech, listening) that are so conditioned they stand in the way of immediate experience. The moment you recognize a pattern, you can accept that it is there with newfound patience. Just allow whatever is there to be there, then keep with it. Imagine mind and body like an open field, and whatever pattern you notice is just moving through like a breeze or a flock of birds. You don't have to identify whatever comes as yours, you can just allow it to live and exist as a pattern. Sometimes this is simply feeling a pattern of a headache or a cramp or part of a breath cycle. What you notice might never move to the level of the linguistic.

Narratives are only ideas. As persons in bodies, we are like threads made up of multiple strands, each thread being a story about our likes and dislikes. Some strands stretch out continuously over long periods of time. Others are like the short bits of wool that are spun into a longer piece of yarn that achieve the appearance of continuity only when seen from a sufficient distance. The practice of yoga postures and attention to breath give us the tools to find this distance so that we can distinguish between being in the body and resting in our ideas of the

body. The more we let the threads of storytelling unravel, the closer we come to the experience of life. Then the body becomes something much more reliable. The closer we are to the heartbeat of existence, the less we need the thread of stories. The practice is to move beyond the story line and to stay, with acceptance, patience, and curiosity, with the changing sensations that appear in each moment. We move from our idea of "body" to the feeling of an energetic flow of conditions. We become process, and in so doing, come closer to nature. There are some practical ways to do this, such as the practice of *smṛti* (immediate attention). *Smṛti* is best translated as "mindfulness," and mindfulness has several important attributes that deepen as practice matures: present-centered, nonconceptual, nonjudgmental, intentional, engagement through nonattachment, nonverbal, exploratory, liberating, steadiness, and ease.

One practical technique for maintaining focus in each and every movement requires that we keep focused on the body in and of itself, and put aside distraction, attachment, or distress with reference to the world. What this means is recognizing the body as a body, without thinking about it in terms of what it means or what it can do in the world. It could be either good or bad looking. It could be strong or weak. It could be flexible or still, plagued with disease, robust and energetic, or agile or clumsy—all the issues we tend to worry about when we think about the body. But as Patañjali says, "Put those issues aside; find a sense of the breath, body, mind, and world as indivisible."[2]

Just be with the body in and of itself. When you sit down on your cushion or yoga mat and close your eyes—what do you find? There's the sensation of "bodiness" that you're sitting with. That's your frame of reference. Try to stay with it. Keep bringing the mind back to this sense of the body until it gets the message and begins to settle down. In the beginning of the practice, you'll find the mind going out to grasp this or that, so just note it enough to tell it to let go, return to the body, and hold on there. Then it goes out to grasp something else, so you tell it to let go, come back, and latch on to the body again. Eventually you reach a point where you can actually grasp hold of the breath and not let go. From that point, whatever else that happens to come into your awareness is like a fish coming up and brushing the back of your hand while you're swimming in a river. At first you note the felt sense of the fish, but once you get used to the fact that there are fish in the water with you, you don't have to continue to notice them. You stay with the body as your basic frame of reference. Thoughts or feelings come and go; you're aware of them, but you don't drop the breath and go running after them. This is when you have really established the body as a solid frame of

reference.

This process relates to why we refer to the posture as a label that sets up a frame of reference. The posture is just a space in which to continually rediscover ourselves as witnesses somehow outside of direct experience. We do not want to confuse that space with some mental fixations on postural-alignment techniques.

As you learn to stay present and recirculate energy by being less distracted, you develop some new qualities of mind such as mindfulness (*smṛti*). The term *mindfulness* means being able to remember, to keep something in mind. In the *Yoga-Sutra*, sometimes the term *smṛti* is used to connote mindfulness practice, and sometimes it refers to the act of remembering. In English, we use the term *mindful* in the same way, as a reminder or a way of waking up to your surroundings as in, “Be mindful of your step.” A practical way to translate *mindfulness* is as present-centered, nonjudgmental awareness with acceptance. In terms of the body, we could also refer to mindfulness as immediate awareness. In the case of establishing the body as a frame of reference, it means being able to remember where you’re supposed to be—with the body—and you don’t let yourself forget, whether you are in formal sitting meditation, prāṇāyāma, or āsana.

Another quality that arises through the practices of prāṇāyāma, meditation, and āsana is concentration, which is another means of being aware of what is actually going on in the present. Are you with the body? Are you with the breath? Is the breath comfortable? Simply notice what’s actually happening in the present moment. We tend to confuse mindfulness with concentration, but actually they are two separate things. Mindfulness means being able to remember where you want to keep your awareness. Concentration means that you are absorbed in what you are doing, no longer relating to your action from the place of a separate self. The term *mindfulness* is a term much more familiar to Buddhism than it is to the *Yoga-Sutra,* but it is nevertheless descriptive of Patañjali’s sixth limb, dhāraṇā. Concentration follows naturally from mindfulness. This is why Patañjali describes a movement from *āsana* (posture) to *pratyāhāra* (natural uncoupling of sense organs from sense objects) to *dhāraṇā* (meditation on an object) to *dhyāna* (absorption) to *samādhi* (deeper levels of concentration and integration). Don’t be put off by terms such as *samādhi* or *concentration* if they are new to you. Patañjali gives very simple and straightforward instructions, not only for how to practice these techniques but why their application is important in working with the habits of mind.

If you realize that the mind has wandered off, you simply bring it back. You do this immediately. You don't let the mind wander around, smelling the flowers and taking pictures. You guide the mind back to the present. When the mind is with its proper frame of reference, we try to be as sensitive as possible to what's going on—not just drifting in the present moment but really trying to penetrate more and more into the subtle details of what's actually happening with the breath or the mind. There is a whole universe even within one breath cycle.

In terms of concentration practice, once you've gotten the mind to settle down, you want to understand the interaction of cause and effect in the process of concentration so that you can get it to settle down more solidly for longer periods of time in all sorts of situations. To do this, you have to learn about how things arise and pass away in the mind and body, not by simply watching them but by actually getting involved in their arising and passing away. Staying with the breath means studying it as it arises and also as it passes away, feeling sensations as they arise and dissipate.

When you practice in this way, you begin to see that these stages or limbs are actually natural outcomes of one another, and you can't help but settle down and get really comfortable with the body in the present moment. That's when you're ready for the next stage in the practice, which is described as being aware of the phenomenon of origination and the phenomenon of passing away. This is a stage where you're trying to understand cause and effect as they happen in the present —in mind and body. Sensations come and go, thoughts come and go, as in fact everything that is perceivable comes and goes.

The link and successive progression from limb to limb is important to understand, especially once the first four limbs have been established. Once attention internalizes and the body is prepared to be still, we can focus the mind on an object. Most meditation practices begin as concentration practices, because one is honing in on a particular field of focus. So, a characteristic of the last three limbs—dhāraṇā, dhyāna, and samādhi—is that each begins with concentration exercises using appropriate objects on which one focuses. Once a certain level of concentration is achieved so that undistracted focusing can be maintained, one goes on to examine, with steady, careful attention and in great detail, all sensory and mental processes. Through this contemplation, we learn how to notice all experience from a place of stillness.

Meditation practice is best pursued under the guidance of a teacher. This is because the mind has such a strong pull toward identifying with the contents of

experience or thinking "I've got it." It is extremely helpful to have someone to guide you through the nooks and crannies of meditation. Even if they only offer simple encouragement when practice is difficult, a teacher can keep you grounded, as the more you progress in practice the more dangers you may meet. Spiritual experience is never a complete, unmediated, spontaneous expression as long as the subtlest kind of conceptual distinction is present, and we must watch for the myriad ways distinctions try to slip in. Our aim is to achieve total and immediate awareness, or mindfulness, of all phenomena. This leads eventually to the full and clear perception of the impermanence of all phenomena and the complete separation of awareness from all that is perceived. This separation is both undivided and free of subject and object. Patañjali calls it *kaivalya.* While *kaivalya* is often translated as referring to the aloofness or isolation of the yogi, it is better described as the distinct difference between *puruṣa,* meaning "pure awareness," and *prakṛti,* which refers to all changing phenomena.

Patañjali doesn't make it clear if the path of dhāraṇā, or meditation on an object, can lead to kaivalya or even freedom from duḥkha. It seems that one has to move on toward deeper states of absorption, matched with a thorough grounding in ethical conduct, in order to move into sustained modes of pure awareness. While the former leads to temporarily altered states of consciousness, it is the latter that leads to enduring and thoroughgoing changes in the person and paves the way to achieving wholeness.

Psychologically, the practical implications of meditation are quite clear. The meditative experiences, when properly carried out and developed, lead to greater ability to concentrate, greater freedom from distraction, greater tolerance of change and turmoil around and inside oneself, and sharper awareness and greater alertness about one's own responses, both physical and mental. It also leads, more generally, to greater calmness or tranquility. Meditation practice, coupled with strong ethical practices, develops an internal wisdom that acts as an antidote to the predispositions, imprints, ongoing habits, and deluded states of mind that so often dominate day-to-day existence. This kind of letting go allows us to be completely open in all our relationships and helps us act wisely and without self-interest in any given situation.

This takes us to one of the simplest aspects of practice: being honest. Sometimes the way we perceive our own experience is so wrapped up in preference and self-image that we don't even know what our own body looks and feels like independent of our ideas of ourselves. Definitions of self are mostly sluggish and eternally escape any accurate measurement or likeness. "The world

is like an experience that has no witness," we are told in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa*.[3] What constitutes reality in any given moment is inseparable from our perception. But once we train the mind to see the body as the body, to be with the breath without distraction, and to stay present even during difficult mental and physical states, a natural outcome is being honest about what we see. The psychological benefit of getting to know the body, breath, and mind without conceptual proliferation is learning how to see honestly, without attachment or aversion. From here, being truthful in other relationships is relatively easy.

When we can find this in practice we discover that suddenly we are cultivating the yama of satya, or truthfulness and honesty in everyday exchanges. If we can't tap into this, the *nadi*s remain clogged with self-image, and self-image is based on *raga* (attachment) and *dveṣa* (aversion) and a never-ending, solipsistic story self-generated by the ahaṇkāra. One story in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa* describes a man whose stories of self, like insubstantial clouds, are mistaken for truth.

> There was once a man made by a magic machine [Mayayantramaya], a stupid idiot. He lived all by himself in an empty place, like a mirage in a desert. Everything else was just a reflection of him, but the fool didn't realize this. As he got old, he thought, the sky is mine and I will rule over it, and so he made a house out of air in the sky in order to rule over the air and the sky. But after a while the house faded away. He cried out, "Oh, my house made of space, where have you gone?" And he built another, and another, and another, and all of them dispersed into the air, and he went on lamenting for them.[4]

Commenting on this parable, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa* says that the man represents the egotism of the "I"-maker (*ahaṇkāra*), and the houses are the various manifestations of the body, or physical existence. The man does not realize that his creations are all mental constructions.

The "I"-maker will always pump out fantasies, but the key is allowing them to have free play without identifying with them or pretending they are real and solid. Even incorporeal fantasies of what the soul is, what it is made of, and where it comes from are stories made by a mind that wants security. One of the key mechanisms of the ahaṇkāra, once it realizes the limits of material existence, is to create a metaphysical existence. This metaphysical existence, usually in the form of stories that make sense of one's place in the world, becomes problematic when taken to be literal truth. But what is most problematic is the literalization of an

essential self whose essence we think we can know. The union inherent in the basic axiomatic definition of the term *yoga* is not metaphysical speculation about our inherent soul but rather a raw experience of the contingent nature of our present conditions and the freedom that arrives with such insight. The breath, body, and mind belong to no one, nor are they completely independent. Yoga teaches us to live comfortably in contradictions without having to resolve them, because beneath the layers and layers of conceptual designations imputed to things via the mind, all opposites are inherently resolved, and everything is free to begin without separation.

17. *Prāṇa* and *Citta*

WE ARE A CULTURE that does not breathe. There is no life without prāṇa, and there is no death without life. The world turns on the cycle of the breath, not just in human form but across the entire living spectrum. Again, prāṇa is not just breathing per se but the life force that animates existence. What does not breathe or move this vital energy efficiently dies quickly. The breath, in yoga, returns us to the present and always acts as the path itself if there is any internal movement to consider. We turn inward most easily by focusing on the breath. The reunion of body and mind or self and soul or whatever way the modern split is described is achieved with breath.

If we are privileged to be present at either the birth or the death of another human being, we can watch them come into the world with an inhale or depart with an exhale. From the first autonomous breath, we pass this life energy back and forth between us. Mothers pass on physical existence to their child by means of breath. Breathing is devotion to life.

Prāṇa (breathing, life energy) and *citta* (consciousness, mind) are two aspects of the same energetic cycle. In *The Tree of Yoga,* B. K. S. Iyengar writes,

> The *Hatha Yoga Pradīpika* says that yoga is prāṇa-vṛtti-nirodha—stilling the fluctuations of the breath. Patañjali's *Yoga-Sutra*s say that yoga is chitta-vṛtti-nirodha —stilling the fluctuations of the mind. The mind can go in many directions in a split second. Its movements are very fast and varied. But the breath cannot go in many directions at once. It has only one path: inhalation and exhalation. It can pause for a moment in a state of retention, but it cannot multiply like the mind. According to the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpika,* controlling the breath and observing its rhythm brings the consciousness to stillness. Thus, though the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpika* begins with the control of prāṇa, breath or

> energy, and Patañjali's *Yoga-Sutras* begin with the control of consciousness, yet they meet at a certain point where there is no difference between them. By controlling the breath you are controlling consciousness, and by controlling consciousness you bring rhythm to the breath.[1]

When we pay attention to the breath, we watch its flow through the prism of the body, and one of the helpful ways of understanding the routes of the breath is by studying the role of the nadis.

Traditionally, Hatha Yoga was the domain of Tantra Yoga. The language of Hatha Yoga is a language that describes patterns of energy and the means of stilling and sculpting those patterns. Hatha Yoga is the detailed investigation of the breath, mind, and body through feeling, visualization, chanting, and direct observation—all of which are techniques that one refines until the internal body becomes still and centered. Much like stilling the fluctuations of the mind, the Hatha Yoga or Tantric practitioner uses the immediate sensations in the body and breath as a doorway into the nature and functioning of the mind. This is very practical: when we breathe, there is a flow of energy, prāṇa, that moves through the body and mind. What does prāṇa flow through? All thought and movement float on this current of prāṇa, and prāṇa flows through the nadis. The nadis route the energy of the breath and can be likened to the bank of a river or the walls of a tunnel. Look into the pathways of the nadis and it's hard not to marvel at the microcosm of life manifest in the body in the form of fluctuating sensations, pulsations, minuscule worlds inside minuscule worlds.

The nadis are like nerves, vessels, meridians, or ducts through which prāṇa flows in mind and body. The nadis transport prāṇa through the body and mind and interestingly do not end at the perimeter of the body but extend out into the world beyond the body. Through visualization and prāṇāyāma technique, one follows prāṇa through the conduits of the nadis. It is easy to follow the breath through immediate feeling as well as visualization so that we notice and feel where it moves in the body. The route of its movement becomes the starting point for the meditation. Meditating on the energetic flow of the breath and visualizing the nadis brings mind, breath, and body together in a seamless unity of attention. When the mind is concentrated in the flow of the breath without identifying with personal thoughts or feelings, we experience a radical departure from our normal mode of perceiving the body, the world, and ourselves. When the mind is focused on one particular thing—in this case the energetic flow and weave of the breath—

our focus becomes so microscopic that the mind becomes quite clear and effortlessly radiant. Experience now comes and goes with ease, because mind and breath are mediated by a calm and unconditioned nervous system. It becomes very still and receptive. The breath moves quietly, as does the mind, but there is no reactivity or lack; rather it unfolds like the quiet blooming of an iris or unspools like a silken thread of light.

In the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa*, Vāsiṣṭa tells Rama,

> The prāṇa is indistinguishably united with the mind. In fact, the consciousness that tends toward thinking, on account of the movement of prāṇa, is known as the mind. Movement of thought in the mind arises from movement of prāṇa; and movement of prāṇa arises because of movement of thought in consciousness. They form a cycle of mutual dependence, like waves and movements of currents in water.[2]

Most people associate vinyasa with the movement of linking postures together; however, there are other ways of understanding it. *Vinyasa* also refers to the movements of thought (*citta vṛtti*), movements within a breath cycle (*prāṇa vāyuu*), and cyclical movement within the circulatory, respiratory, and immune systems. One cannot speak of vinyasa, or movements of the mind-body, without also describing the movement of breath, as they are essentially interdependent. We all know that some steadiness of breathing brings about steadiness in the mind-body. Vāsiṣṭa continues,

> The mind is caused by the movements of prāṇa; and hence by the stilling of prāṇa; the mind becomes still….The movement of mind and prāṇa becomes still when desire (in the form of clinging) comes to an end in one's own heart….[T]he movement of prāṇa is also stilled by the effortless practice of breathing, without strain. This also occurs when you bring the end of an exhale (as retention) to a standstill for longer and longer periods of time.[3]

Vāsiṣṭa instructs Rama in breathing practice in order to demonstrate how perception of the world is continually influenced by one's state of mind and body. Stilling the tendency toward clinging, conceptualizing, and reacting to the world comes about through correct breathing. Breathing without effort is the key to stilling the mind. Stilling the mind allows the habits of thought to recede and the

world to appear immediately, without the obstacles of concepts getting in the way of direct experience. First we stretch the breath and press it through the nadi tubes, especially where certain knots exist; then once the breath is exercised, we leave it alone and feel its unmodified, unhindered rhythm.

Whatever knots in the nadis we find are symptoms of larger holding patterns that we call "the saṁskāras." The saṁskāras come undone when one creates the conditions for a steady and uninterrupted flow of prāṇa through the nadis. It is most helpful to think of the saṁskāras as structural holding patterns that influence the feeling pathways called "nadis." Steady flow occurs when prāṇa (breath, energy) and citta (mind, consciousness) come together and move as one. When the breath and mind move together, the central channels of the body open to the present moment, which is none other than what is occurring now. Like tracing a sound back to its source, or seeing the water that makes up a wave, we keep the mind so intimately connected to the breath that the two become inseparable. In yoga we follow everything to the vanishing edge, where form becomes absence, and what appears as empty is brought forward again into the world of form. This is why we practice yoga postures as a form of prāṇāyāma, which in turn is a practice of meditation.

When we move toward integrating āsana practice and prāṇāyāma, postural alignment serves the respiratory system, and all alignment techniques become rituals of devotion in service of inhaling and exhaling. Because the mind has to focus on a movement without distraction in order to follow the breath, āsana interiorizes awareness (*pratyāhāra*) and sets the mind and body in concentration (*dhyāna*).

Exploring yoga postures psychologically, physically, and energetically allows us to access depths of yoga practice, where many different paths come together. T. K. V. Desikachar considered the tendency to see the various approaches in yoga as leading to separate goals a superficial form of understanding:

> People often ask me if I teach āsanas, and when I answer "Yes," they say: "Oh, then you are a hatha yogi!" If I am talking about the *Yoga-Sutra* they say "Oh, you are a rāja yogi!" If I say that I recite the Vedas the comment is: "Oh, so you are a mantra yogi!" If I simply say that I practice yoga, they do not know what to make of me. Many people want to give everything and everyone a label. Unfortunately, these classifications have become much too important and give the impression that there are fundamental differences between the various

> forms of yoga. But really they are all dealing with the same thing, and are only looking at them from different perspectives. If we really follow one direction in yoga as far as we can go, then it will lead us along all paths of yoga.[4]

All practices point toward reunification of mind and body. Mind and body operate in unity, as do the various limbs and methods of yoga. As Desikachar says, “Primarily it is a question of our state of mind. Whatever happens in the mind and causes a change in it affects the whole person, including the body and all experiences on a physical level.”[5]

Unless āsana practice is explored to its depth—that is, looking beyond just actions of body to see also mind, breath, and energetic flow—we won’t fully penetrate to the yoga of āsana. Don’t be caught in the superficial geometry of yoga postures without tending to and tuning in to the quality of the gaze, the spreading of the breath, the pauses at the end and beginning of every breath cycle, and the diaphragmatic action of the *bandha*s; these internal forms of alignment draw the mind into concentration and insight, without which the mind remains at the edge and not the core of yoga āsana.

Flow and Stability

In Tantric terms, we can call the process of prāṇa “energy flow.” Fluctuating patterns of energy in the body, like fluctuations in the mind, become steady through correct breathing and immediate attention. The interesting thing is that good technique requires the attention that we are trying to cultivate in all the other limbs. All techniques, when not turned into doctrine, become mindfulness practices—they give the mind a specific place to focus so that we can drop into the kinds of absorption that break up distraction and habit. When the mind enters into any action fully, when we are completely present to what is unfolding as it unfolds, the fluctuations of citta settle into nirodha.

When energy can flow through the body uninterrupted by latent physical or psychological tendencies, consciousness settles, and one finds equilibrium of the kośas. This is not esoteric but simply practical psychophysiology based on verifiable experience. When mind and breath settle into each other, the nervous system responds, and the body lets go of old conditioning. Like a rock is heavy, water wet, or the sky open and endless, the body too has an essence, a way of

being as it is. When prāṇa and citta flow together, the saṁskāras in the mind-body begin to dissolve, because the attributes that give rise to the saṁskāras dissolve when there is no clinging or constriction in either mind or body.

There is no posture without energy flow. More than that there is no life without it. Every living organism depends on energy flow. However, that alone is not enough. The flow of prāṇa is not sufficient in and of itself; everything also needs to capture and store energy as well. For example, the sun shines on Earth, and it also gives light to Mars and Venus, but only Earth has life, as far as we know, because only Earth can successfully capture and store sunlight. What actually enables life to occur is the way in which an energy cycle can open and close. When energy is flowing in a circle, we have a life cycle as it were, which stores and feeds on the energy within those specific conditions. Something magical happens within a circle, a maṇḍala. A circle means perpetual return, and perpetual return gives stability. This is what we call "dynamic stability."

A yoga posture is a perfect model of dynamic stability. When we close an energy circle, through focused attention, correct breathing, and the application of bandhas, the prāṇa in the body and mind begins to move through new channels and also unclogs previously knotted channels. This unknotting only occurs, however, when prāṇa is coherent, steady, and recirculating. The nadis are like meridians through which prāṇa flows, and prāṇa cannot flow clearly when the tubes through which the energy of the breath moves are clogged.

Notice, for instance, in your own body how there are parts of the breath cycle that are smooth and places where the breath ripples, skips, or feels constricted. Even if you listen to the sound of the breath, you will notice that sometimes the breath sounds smooth and sometimes it is interrupted by little fluctuations. When the breath fluctuates, so does the mind. It is usually when the prāṇa movement is interrupted at sites of physical holding that the mind gets distracted. Prāṇa and citta move together. They are two sides of the same coin.

Swami Rama describes the way these winds of the breath reflect the functioning of the entire mind-body process:

> Breath is an external manifestation of the force of prāṇa. Breath is the fly-wheel that regulates the entire machine of the body. Just as the control of the fly-wheel of an engine controls all the other mechanisms in it, so the control of the external breath leads to control of the gross and subtle, physical and mental aspects of our life machine.[6]

The Tantric model of prāṇa parallels what the *Yoga-Sutra* describes. It is said that there are 72,000 nadis in the body; together they form an extremely fine network of subtle channels spread throughout the ethereal body (body of prāṇa, pranic sheath, or energetic body). Most disease or stiffness is the result of congestion, blocks, or restrictions in the nadi system. The nadis are psychological as well, so when you talk of psychological hindrances, anxieties, neurotic tendencies, or obstacles, we also use the language of the nadis. Psychological knots exist within the nadis in the same way that overturned logs or beaver dams interrupt the smooth flow of a river. The breath always wants to move without interruption, and the blocks in the cycles of the breath, which we can know by looking at distractions or agitation in mind and body, become the places where we focus our attention. The breath and its blocks will always reveal the next step. All symptoms act this way—as signals for our attention and as markers on the path.

The importance of the *iḍā, pin?galā,* and *suṣumnā* nadis is well developed in Tantric texts, and their signifigance is also the basis of Pattabhi Jois's teachings of āsana and prāṇāyāma. Pattabhi Jois teaches correct breathing, gazing, and bandhas in order to achieve good pranic flow through the nadis. B. K. S. Iyengar uses the same terminology. Kṛṣṇamacharya, when he went to Tibet to study yoga, returned to the practice of Hatha Yoga an emphasis on subtle attention to the energetic elements of practice. When yoga posture sequences are practiced from the inside out, meaning that the mind is not just with the physical movement but also with the subtle movements of breath and energy, attention turns inward and the posture practice becomes a Tantric one.

> To preserve energies in the body and prevent their dissipation, āsanas and mudras (seals), prāṇāyāmas and bandhas…were prescribed. The heat so generated causes the kuṇḍalinī to uncoil. The serpent lifts its head, enters the suṣumnā and is forced up through the chakras one by one to the sahasrāra.[7]

This passage by B. K. S. Iyengar describes how attention and breath flow through the meridians of the body until the energy in the pelvic floor, in the form of kuṇḍalinī, begins to move through the channels, especially the central axis of the body (*suṣumnā*). Later in his description of kuṇḍalinī in *Light on Yoga,* B. K. S. Iyengar describes the serpent as an "allegory" that denotes the movement of vital energy.[8] What is important here is the way that kuṇḍalinī represents in

image form the clear movement of energy within the meridians of the body. The energy can only move through the body when attention is present. As we press the breath through the nadis, we are also stretching the mind through the nadis. Kuṇḍalinī is representative of a mind that moves with the breath as one while they course through the nervous system and dissolve the distractions and mental toxins that previously obstructed the clear passage of energy through the systems of the body.

Kuṇḍalinī is not the breath itself but rather the energetic aspect of the life force. It does manifest partly as breath. In order to understand the term a bit better, it's helpful to return to the etymological significance of the word *kuṇḍalinī,* from the verb *kuṇda,* meaning "to burn." Kuṇḍalinī is the burning up of knots and holding patterns in mind and body, the most significant of which is the clinging to self-image. This may explain why many people describe "kuṇḍalinī rising" as both full of physical sensation and also mental fear. Abhiniveśa, the fear of letting go of self-image, is always at work in any process of letting go. It is a fear we must contend with again and again as we progress in our practice.

Hatha Yoga and Tantra Yoga are inseparable when practiced from the inside out, because the essence of Hatha Yoga has always been tantra. In fact, what took the great teacher Kṛṣṇamacharya out of India and to Tibet was his search for someone to put the tantra back into the physical postures of Hatha Yoga. He needed someone to help him find the subtle energetics or psychological dimensions of the physical practice of yoga.

Prāṇa flows where citta goes. Thus, we steady the eyes so that attention and the breath, citta and prāṇa, come together. Bandhas are conjunctions of energy that act as valves to hold and recirculate energy within the nadis so that prāṇa does not leak from the body. Practicing a synchronizing of breath, gaze, and bandhas simultaneously creates a closed loop of energetic flow within the nadis. This is called "pratyāhāra," which refers to the natural uncoupling of sense organs from sense objects when the breath and attention move as one.

When energy increases in the body during posture and breathing practices, this energy will always move to reorganize internal systems. When the pressure is turned up, the system begins to change in order to recirculate the energy. When on the other hand we lose energy, the flow increases but conditioning of the system remains unchanged. Unless we can allow this to happen naturally by setting up the condition for good energy flow, the flow will only increase

temporarily before becoming fragmented. We need to retain some energy in practice in order to open new channels and change internal structures. In breathing practices, we pay very close attention to the eyes so that when new and more challenging energetic waves move through the body, we can stay focused. Distraction often manifests in the eyes. We express mental hunger and want through the eyes. We are accustomed to always looking externally for new and different stimuli and objects of desire. So in practice we try to soften this energy. This does not mean we get stiff or try to maintain perfect stillness with the gaze; rather, we try to gently set up intention to face and give space to whatever occurs in immediate awareness without trying to grasp or hold it.

There are three significant channels I would like to go over that work together and relate to prāṇa. Each has its own qualities and related images and sensations. The iḍā, on the left side of the body, descends from the bridge of the right nasal passage and is generally associated with the moon, white in color, and moves with the prāṇa or rising vital breath and *Śiva* (male energy). The piṅgalā, on the right side of the body, descends from the left nasal passage and relates to the sun, the color red, and blood and moves with the descending apānic breath and *Śākti* (female energy). The central channel, or suṣumnā, is associated with fire and the union of the iḍā and piṅgalā. Pattabhi Jois calls the suṣumnā nadi, which runs from the center of the pelvic floor through to the crown of the head, "the empty flute."

The term *kuṇḍalinī* has been fetishized and imbued with literalist interpretations (such as a purely physical feeling of tingling up the spine), reducing the essence of that process. "Kuṇḍalinī" describes in metaphorical language the present moment that is curled up but inaccessible in every movement of experience in which there is even an ounce of self-image or conceit.

By working with correct breath, attention, gaze, and alignment in every yoga posture we aim to smooth out the fluctuating patterns of citta and prāṇa within the nadis and among the different sheaths of the body. We carry this out by being present even in times of distraction. Even when we are caught in turbulent thoughts or emotions, we can return to the breath and, in doing so, calm fluctuations in mind and nervous system. Over time, the calmness becomes easier to find, and you can establish the calmness as the basis for further practice. Kuṇḍalinī is a metaphor for present experience free of the predetermined frames created by the mind's preferences. When the nadis open and kuṇḍalinī uncoils and flows through the suṣumnā, we can understand this as the removal of any

psychophysical bias that interrupts the opportunity to be present. Like a serpent representing the profundity of now, kuṇḍalinī speaks of nothing beyond itself. Like the present moment, kuṇḍalinī is present in its absence. To sense this paradox requires of the practitioner focus and relaxed attention to what is currently and constantly occurring within the body during a single breath cycle. Kuṇḍalinī is aroused as the present movement is appreciated—not through conception but through the simple act of breathing itself. It is the breath that wakes the serpent, like a rock ledge creates the conditions for a waterfall.

In breathing practices that include yoga postures, we are looking for a clean, uninterrupted flow of energy, as that sets up conditions for the ideal maṇḍala, or energy cycle. Every maṇḍala becomes a home for coherent energy. Coherent energy comes together and moves within channels of a cycle so that it can do its work gracefully. It is obviously different than incoherent energy, which goes in all directions and remains distracted and unstable over time. Incoherent energy is prāṇa that moves through overly conditioned channels of thought, feeling, perception, sensation, and movement. So what we are looking to cultivate is clean, uninterrupted flow.

If there is past injury or strong places of holding, the energy is decreased, interrupted, or rerouted. What can also happen is that a holding pattern may feel to us reversed so that instead of resistance we feel a lack of resistance. For example, if there is a place without any resistance, such as a misplaced hip or an overfunctioning nervous system, or even a personality with weak boundaries, the prāṇa flows too much. We may thus feel that some place or channel is very open, which causes us to believe the prāṇa is flowing without obstruction, but if there is no strength or coherence alongside the openness, the energy will leak out rather than build. So, patterns or habits can take many forms.

An interesting thing is that the tendency of prāṇa is to flow with a balanced velocity and an intuited smoothness. A smooth flow of prāṇa creates graceful movement, a calm nervous system, and a steady mind. The energy in the body is always aiming to improve circulation and steadiness of flow, much like a river's motion. DNA is constantly being altered, cells are always letting go of previous patterns of control, and tissues are always working to rid themselves of the chemicals we ingest.

A major key in persevering continuity lies in the ability of the body's systems to right the countless small wrongs that bombard the body and mind at every instant. Our systems adapt, change molecular responses, repair, all in the service

of keeping the gyroscope of the mind-body spinning smoothly. It is this constant flux that enables dynamic stability and the motion of stillness. Even the aspects we think of as constant, like bones or self or memories are constantly changing in order to maintain the dynamic equilibrium of cellular life that supports the dynamic equilibrium of our lives in the world. The changing constancy of living underlies the homeostasis of our ecological existence. It demonstrates firsthand the teaching that everything that is perceivable (*prakṛti*) is provisional and contingent.

Our minds and bodies are always limited by their origins. Change in mind and body means being stretched out of what is known in order to sow the seeds of openness to what is unknown, and that is why change and transformation are more a matter of loss than of growth. The language of growth tends to become personal, entrepreneurial, and ambitious. Sometimes we are so used to, so caught up in, our ways of moving and being that we don't see them as stale or outmoded until symptoms appear to tell us so. Taking on the new is always easier than letting go of what is old, because what is historical is what is already known and therefore comfortable. The first step in working with our conditioned minds and bodies is seeing what is old in the first place. Only then can we let it go with knowledge that we have a home in the present moment whenever we are ready to arrive.

18. The Empty Vessel

> The root of "spirit" is the Latin *spirare,* to breathe. Whatever lives on the breath, then, must have its spiritual dimension.
>
> —JANE HIRSHFIELD

THERE IS NO BODY to speak of, just a flow of conditions, empty of an inherent identity. A yoga posture allows us to experience this energetically, but it requires focus and patience and the ability to see clearly and stay with the difficult moments that arise when the prāṇa meets deep holding patterns and we want to get away or let distraction take over. The fear of letting go into the reality of what is, is nothing other than the fear of giving up a fixed self-image; this kind of fear is the self running away from its inherent intimacy with all things, vast, unknowable, always changing. But there is no way to escape. As the Chinese poet Li Po wrote,

> The birds have vanished down the sky.
> Now the last cloud drains away.
> We sit together, the mountain and me,
> until only the mountain remains.[1]

It is through the engagement with what is not "me" that I participate in the world even as I do so via body and mind. A yoga posture is not a self-enclosed static entity but an organic cycle—an open movement. The body and mind come alive when the senses converge in the world. When mind and body are flexible and the sense organs clearer, kuṇḍalinī, in the form of prāṇa, begins to flow uninterruptedly.

The technique brings us to a point where we are fully in an action. But once we are in the action we no longer need the technique. It is like crossing a river in a raft we have built. The raft must be strong and precisely made in order to support us, but then once we have crossed, we no longer need the craft.

After the technique drops, the conceptualizations drop, and then feeling like a

self falls away until there is movement and perception and sensation; but one is so fully in the movement that there is nobody there. Then there is movement without mover. There is a yoga pose but nobody practicing. Like never-ending sky over endless mountains, being who you are in the most elegant sense tolerates even discursive thoughts and strong emotions while rejecting nothing.

Pleasure and pain are such a major part of our perceptual lives. It's almost a strange occurence in nature to be so focused on these two realms. Through the practice of yoga postures, we learn to move deeply within postures from the inside out so that our kinesthetic experience is dominant above our modes of preference. We feel something so internal that we simply dissolve into movement and feeling. Then, even with activity in the mind there is still no sign of an agent. In this state the internal dimension of yoga opens up.

This is the mystical side of yoga, which is nothing more than deep experience of the present conditions. If we cling to any of these wonderful moments, then the yoga practice returns us to the superficial level of a "me" that needs to "have" an experience. When we have profound experiences in yoga, such as direct contact with strong energies or clear insights, we have to also be vigilant that the mind does not interpret those experiences as special, as something to chase after. It is easy to give such experiences authority, but this desire is a form of ego-clinging. When energy moves, states of mind surface. When we experience a powerful state, there is a desire to work to abide permanently in such a deep state of being. And to be able to do so would show that one had great skill in concentration. However this would not be liberation. Though we move toward and through it, samādhi is not the goal of yoga.

In the last chapter of the *Yoga-Sutra,* Patañjali states that deep meditative concentration is a skill but not the goal, because there can still be clinging even to those states. What these states do offer, however, is room for a mind, body, and heart to move free from the strong pull of materialism. This is quite valuable in a culture that is always dangling the potential for grasping and reward.

Yoga postures have always been considered a Tantric practice, because working with the physical body brings one into direct contact with energy flow, the nervous system, the breath, and the visualizing mind. A yoga posture is an invitation into the kinesthetic sense of being everything and at the same time being nothing. It is the awakening from the illusion of a separate me, a separate body, and the feeling of fragmentation. We have talked about this from the perspective of mind and body. Nondualistic practice is the thread that weaves

together sutra (psychological study) and tantra (energetic movement in mind and body) to achieve the same goal: to keep mind and body alert and open to their own transformation.

We are not so different from trees and water and birds. We are, of course, humans and not another species, and we can see this in our nature. Yet in our different, non-difference we must ask, what does it mean essentially, to be human? What happens to us if we find a way to drop our sense of self? What occurs psychologically when we are finally free to be lost in the world without self-reference, without needing to treat our experiences in terms of a separate "me"? What does it mean to leave the other, be it person or world, unjudged and unnarrated? What happens when we become the mirror behind us rather than checking ourselves endlessly in the mirror in front of us? What is it that obscures our basic nature?

What obstructs our basic nature, what Pattabhi Jois calls "the enemies in the heart," is our habitual clinging to duality. This clinging is reinforced over and over again, because it takes a fair amount of stillness and reflection to notice how the way that we experience life is limited by the conditioned grooves we call the saṁskāras. That is why yoga postures and meditation are so important—they show us how limiting these grooves are. Yoga postures train us to be free of clinging to duality. The process of building a practice gradually brings together and essentially fuses the breath and the mind. When the mind and breath are brought together in an action, duality vanishes. What remains is boundless and outside of time. It has been called the *paramātman* (the selfless self of awareness). Patañjali calls this *śūnyatā* (emptiness). He also calls the experience of nonduality the puruṣa, which is empty of self-form (*svarūpa śūnya*). Patañjali gives this pure awareness a name, "puruṣa," but the name itself is, of course, not "puruṣa."

Where does winter get its snow? Where does spring arrive from? The Buddhists are always challenging the Hindus on whether there is a true self (*ātman*) or nothing one can call self (*anātman*). Patañjali stakes the middle ground between these two systems, and in doing so he creates a paradox that many traditions have tried to resolve through convenient interpretation. For example, when one looks through the innumerable English translations of the *Yoga-Sutra*, almost no one translates the word *śūnyatā.* But when we look into what the Indian tradition calls "self," it is the selfless self that is no self at all. In this I think it's helpful to look at an exchange Robert Thurman had at a yoga studio in Manhattan:

> Student: Isn't the traditional Indian teaching of the self in direct opposition to the Buddhist teaching of emptiness?
>
> Thurman: That is superficial. Opposing those systems in that way makes no inroads into what they are actually about.
>
> What is the self?
>
> Student: Well, it's the opposite of emptiness.
>
> Thurman: No, no, no, the Indians would say. *Neti, neti* (it's not that, it's not that). The self is not your body, not your eye, not your mind, not your thoughts, not your perception, it's not you or any "thing" for that matter. No, no, no.[2]

All traditions use words to answer and describe, with varied levels of effectivness, this experience of stillness and oneness with the nature of things. Puruṣa is a way of being without becoming, like being a form of life rather than a somebody. When one turns awareness from the breath or sounds toward awareness itself, one might notice that there's nothing findable there. There is no core at the core—only more conditions coming and going.

In this book I have focused on the way śūnyatā has been used by Patañjali to point out a paradox, namely that from the point of view of the practitioner, pure awareness (*puruṣa*) is the felt experience of nonduality (*samādhi*). The tension is that as soon as we use words, we find ourselves caught up in dualistic language. Great Buddhist teachers such as Nāgārjuna, and especially those in the Mahayana traditions, have been able to turn language inside out and on its head until they no longer get stuck using concepts to describe the meditative state of complete integration. Patañjali gives the state a name—puruṣa—and in so doing creates a paradox that scholars have argued about ever since. Yet from the perspective of the yoga practitioner, the experience of samādhi is identical to the Buddhist notion of śūnyatā, and Patañjali uses both terms in the *Yoga-Sutra* and creates a kind of artificial fence upon which he sits. He does not think puruṣa is an entity, as the dualistic tradition of Sāṅkhya Yoga claims, and he does not deconstruct the language used to describe puruṣa in the way the Buddha might have. Nevertheless, from the internal perspective of the yogi, he is describing the same experience. Perhaps the term *puruṣa* is the only thing that keeps the *Yoga-Sutra* from becoming a Buddhist text.

To be liberated is to be free from clinging, even to concepts. When we begin

yoga posture practice, it feels as though there is a solid "me" practicing with this solid body. But over time, the sense of "I" shifts, and we notice that change. The body is pliable and not static, and we notice that too. In fact, the "I" is not dependent on the body, and the body is not dependent on the "I." Yoga postures allow us to dismantle our fixation on the permanence of what we experience. We usually cling to the content of our experience as if it were not just something experienced but rather something that's real, solid, and permanent. But when we look honestly, especially from a place of stillness, we see that experience is simply experience, and it is not made of anything solid whatsoever. Experience is simply an empty cognition.

When the saṁskāras are seen for what they are—conditioned patterns or potentials that influence clinging and misapprehension—then they can be seen through. This is what is meant by *śūnyatā* (emptiness). When we are with experience as experience, the heart opens and is bottomless. When the subject disappears so does the object, and vice versa. There is simply one heart, one mind, and immediate awareness; the heart opens when there is no clinging in mind or body.

One of the most famous passages from the Upaniṣads, in which Yājñavalka speaks to his wife, Maitreyi, describes the way in which the nature of a moment, when seen for what it is, reveals the boundlessness of reality. Notice the paradoxical language and Yājñavalka (or the author's) way of pushing past definitions. "Arising out of the elements (*bhūta*), into them also one vanishes away. After death there is no consciousness (*ne pretya samjna sti*)."[3]

Shocked by this statement, Maitreyi asks him to continue:

> For where there is a duality, as it were, there one sees another….But when, verily, everything has become just one's own self, then what could one see and through what?…Through what could one know that owing to which all this is known? So, through what could one understand the understander? This Self…is imperceptible, for it is never perceived.[4]

What Yājñavalka is saying here is that when one realizes nonduality, dualistic consciousness dissolves. How can we name something "self" if it is impossible to perceive, and is therefore not a "thing" at all? "Self" in this case refers to the boundlessness of reality, the empty nature of things as they are. When the self

dissolves, so too does the object.

To sketch in broad terms, in the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the human person is seen as needing repentance, divine forgiveness, and renewal. The Absolute, for these allied traditions, is an omnipotent, anthropomorphically envisioned, monotheistic godhead. Alternately, it is taught in Buddhism that the human person is experiencing suffering unnecessarily, because he or she is mistakenly perceiving themselves as an enduring, self-conscious entity. Liberation, in Buddhism, begins with the realization that there is no eternal self, but only momentary states that give the illusion of a permanent person. The final extinction of the human person in the form of nirvāna (literally "blowing out") is thus the goal. This is quite similar to Patañjali's description of nirodha. The Absolute, in Buddhist terms, correlates with śūnya, boundlessness or emptiness. In Buddhism, there is no god per se, nor any other permanent metaphysical reality. In Hinduism, the human existential dilemma is caused by ignorance (*avidyā*) of our true state as permanent spiritual beings (*ātman*) and our illusion (*māyā*) of separation from reality. Liberation (*mokṣa*) is achieved by transcending this illusion and by realizing our inherent union (*yoga*) with reality. Speaking in the most general of terms, the absolute reality in Hinduism, and more specifically in Advaita Vedanta (*advaita* literally means "not two"), is termed "Brahman," even though Brahman is non-anthropomorphic and certainly not a "thing."

Each of these traditions holds a very different account of what constitutes our true spiritual nature; each has its own distinctive idea of what it means to realize our true nature, and each has a uniquely divergent idea of what the ultimate nature of the Absolute is. Yoga seems to move within all of these traditions quite comfortably, since Patañjali and also texts such as the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa* and *Hatha Yoga Pradīpika* use language purposely borrowed from other traditions in a way that asks the practitioner to move beyond the doctrine of systems in order to see what those systems are pointing toward. In this sense, we could call Patañjali's approach toward reality an agnostic one. The yogi does not see her practices as metaphors of consolation. Standing on the threshold of imagination but firmly planted in present experience, the yogi is concerned with freeing the mind and responding to present circumstances without self-created entrapments. In an increasingly interconnected world, we come to see that yoga is everywhere and everything and that the human being is essentially compassion.

I have chosen these three broad religious traditions (Abrahamic, Buddhist, Hindu) in order to highlight the point that not only are there different religions

but there are also different categorical types of religion. The point is that these may not be different systems talking about the same thing but rather quite different systems talking about different types of experience. What is so fascinating (and also challenging) about yoga is that it slides between traditions by pointing out the limits of having a system in the first place. Patañjali talks about emptiness and also about puruṣa, pure awareness, creating a paradox of sorts while also appealing to those who have no problem being in between systems. He teaches on the emptiness of self-form (*svarūpa Śūnya*) and also on the tool of using a personal deity (*īśvara-praṇidhānā*) for meditation practice.

The shadow side of this is that there is no network of yoga temples or priests that determine who is and who isn't practicing or who can and who can't be a teacher. The benefit of such a nondualist, agnostic, and anarchic reading of this tradition is that many practitioners have to go deep into texts and practices in order to embody and realize the basic teachings of yoga, free from the constraint of overly rigid doctrine. The shadow of such a viewpoint is that since there is no systematized approach to teaching, many people simply turn yoga into whatever they want, leading to a self-styled practice that falls prey to the ego's tricks and games. Of course we are always going to interpret tradition—that is how it comes alive in each and every one of us and becomes a dynamic process rather than something imagined as timeless existing within a cultural vacuum.

Attending a yoga class at any popular studio is a fascinating and disconcerting study of the way in which people sculpt yoga into whatever they would like it to be. Many teachers use their certification as a modern "yoga teacher" to simply articulate their personal philosophy on life, sometimes without ever having had a teacher of their own. Yoga is a complex and intimate set of interrelated practices that inform every aspect of life, creating a coherent path toward liberation by understanding the causes of suffering and the path to freedom.

Hopefully some of the ideas in this book will help practitioners in their approach to practice. My hope is that we can all discover the deeper frameworks of yoga theory and practice and be affected and changed by them rather than simply manipulating yoga so that it conveniently fits into our lifestyle. Yoga does not offer consolation or security through blind faith, nor does it offer elaborate theories of god, fantasies of a better afterlife, or security and comfort in the face of death. Rather, yoga teaches us to value our existential disorientation and to look into it openly and without distraction.

In order to be truly free, you must desire to know the truth more than you want

to feel good. Practicing in a way that supports our lifestyle and everything we already know is not a challenge to our basic patterns of conditioning in body, mind, and heart. Because if feeling good is our goal, then we will lose interest in what is true as soon as we feel better than we did before. And this habit will keep us forever locked in a cycle of pursuit and dissatisfaction. This does not mean that feeling good or experiencing joy or bliss is a bad thing. Given the choice, anyone would choose to feel bliss rather than sorrow. It simply means that if the desire to feel good is stronger than the yearning to see, know, and experience reality honestly, then this desire will always be distorting the perception of what is real while corrupting one's deepest integrity. Yoga is the union beneath good and bad, heaven and hell, self and no self. It is a set of practices aimed at the resolution of opposites. Yoga is the natural state of being with what is, and it is a practice that supports us in waking up to this natural state. The important point though is that we need practice, practical tools, and everyday skills that help us move outside of our conditioned patterns. And for this we need some kind of system. But the system is not the yoga, only the technology for waking us up to the inherent interpermeating nature of existence.

It is true that if the real teacher is the present moment, everything is practice. Yet most of us need some formal practice in order to learn the skills necessary to actually interrupt the momentum of distraction and wandering. That is why we have to practice yoga postures with great concentration, patience, grace, and subtlety. That is why we practice sitting meditation with pure acceptance and curious investigation. That is why we try always to refine our insight into impermanence, the contingency of self-image, the transience of all things, and the ways in which we create our own duḥkha. In the second chapter of the *Yoga-Sutra,* while discussing clinging as a case of mistaken fixation, Patañjali prescribes a complete reversal of perception as the necessary route out of ignorance: "Lacking this wisdom, one mistakes that which is impermanent, impure, distressing, or empty of self, for permanence, purity, happiness and self."[5]

The present moment is very easy to talk about, and when someone can speak about it clearly, we get a taste of waking up. Many of us feel this way after reading books about yoga or attending workshops. Yet we go on retreat and return home only to find that within a few days many of our deepest habits return to the surface. Habits have their own momentum. That is why we need more than books or momentary insight. We need to embody the technology of waking up as more than a skill set, and certainly as more than a new philosophy, so that it

becomes a way of being fully in life. Over time such an approach to practice will generate communities of practitioners and a culture focused on genuine freedom and care for one another.

Our insights need to be tested out over and over again in varying contexts. Practice and community are essential for this. Maybe some are born into a very awake existence, and Patañjali states that this is the case, but I know that, for me, the present is conceptual without the grounding of practice. "Practice, practice, practice," says Pattabhi Jois, "and all is coming."

I would add to Pattabhi Jois's statement that when practice is planted in theory and theory in practice, our insight grows not just deep but wide. Over time, awareness touches everything, like crisscrossing root systems stretched out under everything. When practice and theory go together seamlessly and our insights are continually tested out in real life, our waking up is practical and ongoing. This is called *prajña* (wisdom). Wisdom is the testing out, refinement, and maturation of insight. A practice that matures, both by working with the mind-body process and also through expression in community, leads to a life of wisdom. If you feel called, you must take the path. The writer Marcel Proust sums up the cultivation of wisdom like this:

> We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness, which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world.[6]

Yoga is concerned with opening up our ways of regarding and acting in the world. Beginning in the body, yoga teaches us how to discover for ourselves the inherent unity of life. Free from doctrine and certainly from dogma, we are asked to wake up to the reality of being present in an ever-changing world, without clinging. This is the heart of practice and the heart of nonduality. An internal or psychological approach to yoga uses perception in this very moment as the path that leads toward waking up from the dualistic habits of clinging and repetitiveness. Practice that includes the psychological aspects of waking up teaches us how to interrupt the momentum of past conditioning in order to lead a life of ongoing awakening. As the scholar Stephen Batchelor articulates it,

> By paying mindful attention to the sensory immediacy of experience, we realize how we are created, molded, formed by a bewildering matrix

> of contingencies that continually arise and vanish. On reflection, we see how we are formed from the patterning of the DNA derived from our parents, the ring of a hundred billion neurons in our brains, the cultural and historical conditioning of the twentieth century, the education and upbringing given us, all the experiences we have ever had and choices we have ever made. These processes conspire to configure the unrepeatable trajectory that culminates in this present moment. What is here now is the unique but shifting impression left by all of this, which I call "me."
>
> Moreover, this gradual dissolution of a transcendental basis for self nurtures an empathetic relationship with others. We find that the grip of self not only leads to alienation but numbs one to the anguish of others, while heartfelt appreciation of our own contingency enables us to recognize our interrelatedness with other equally contingent forms of life. Through practice we find that we are not isolated units but participants in the creation of an ongoing, shared reality.[7]

Our practice, like our lives, does not arrive fully unfolded. Our work is to practice in such a way that makes sense for our particular life but also challenges the stories of ourselves that enclose our lives in cycles of habit. With clarity, flexibility, and steadiness, yoga teaches us how to move responsively through the details of life. This is possible in every unfolding moment of reality. The teacher Adyashanti writes,

> To the extent that the fire of truth wipes out all fixated points of view, it wipes out inner contradictions as well, and we begin to move in a whole different way. The Way is the flow that comes from a place of non-contradiction—not from good and bad. Much less damage tends to be done from that place. Once we have reached the phase where there is no fixed self-concept, we tend to lead a selfless life. The only way to be selfless is to be self less—without a self. No matter what it does, a self isn't going to be selfless. It can pretend. It can approximate selflessness, but a self is never going to be selfless because there is always an identified personal self at the root of it.[8]

Such an attitude creates in practitioners an ongoing evaluation of and commitment to practice. We work until the distinctions between formal and

informal practice begin to dissolve, as do the frames that create any form of separation. Eventually we come to see that we penetrate the mysteries of being simply by letting go into the mystery itself. We find there is nothing more infinite than this very moment, which is exactly where yoga begins.

19. *Śūnyatā*

BOUNDLESS AND EMPTY

Beyond the senses are the objects,
Beyond the objects is the mind,
Beyond the mind, the intellect,
Beyond the intellect, the ātman,
Beyond the ātman, the non-manifest,
Beyond the non-manifest, the spirit,
Beyond the spirit there is nothing,
This is the end, pure awareness.

—*KATHA UPANIṢAD*

THE LANGUAGE to which traditional yoga practices belong speaks in terms of "self," "soul," "spirit," and "seer." However, those terms are used much differently than they are in Western culture. Over thousands of years, great care has been taken to define and redefine these words in the light of deep meditative practices. Yoga practice has always moved hand in hand with a constant refinement of language. In most meditative traditions, teachers have taken great care with the language that they use to describe their experience, because language always captures our experience within borders that are always essentially too limited.

Śūnyatā is an example of a term close to the heart of Patañjali but most associated with the teaching of the Buddha. We find the term *Śūnya* repeated in Patañjali's *Yoga-Sutra* many times and at key moments. Recent scholarship shows the roots of the *Yoga-Sutra* arising from the teachings of the Buddha, yet irrespective of these traditional ties, the teaching of śūnyatā has specific meanings in the context of yoga psychology. When one has an experience of being completely open and transparent, the mind automatically wants to name it.

But what the Buddha and Patañjali share is the distrust of leaning on the names we have for clear, unmodified awareness.

In a text on mysticism dating from 1957, the Indologist R. C. Zaehner characterizes the difficulty in conceiving the teachings on pure awareness found in Patañjali's *Yoga-Sutra* when he writes that yoga has, "perhaps the strangest conception of 'God' known to the whole of religion."[1] Again, yoga sidesteps the issue of blind faith in God by offering practical techniques for liberation alongside a distrust in reifying our experience with language and concepts.

At first, the Hindu way of talking about the phenomenon of complete and unmediated reality seems diametrically opposed to what one finds in Buddhism, but this is not the case. In the way that someone interested in the theory of Carl Jung would do well to begin with Sigmund Freud, it is important to explore the *Yoga-Sutra* in the context of the Sāṇkhya, Hindu, and Buddhist systems that predate it. At first blush, the Hindu description of *jīva,* the Advaita description of *ātman-brahman,* and the Buddhist notion of no-self or emptiness seem at odds with one another, and in ways they are. They share something, but it would be unwise to simplify these traditions and say they are talking about the same thing only in different languages, because that would deny the uniqueness of each system. But what is interesting about the *Yoga-Sutra* is that it teaches that pure awareness (*puruṣa*) is empty of self (*sva*) and form (*rūpa*), which places Patañjali's teaching square in the middle of these diametrically opposed ways of talking about reality. Patañjali's teachings on *svarūpa śūnya* slide in between the Hindu and Buddhist doctrines by giving a name to awareness and then turning the name inside out. This paradox urges us to think deeply about the language we use to talk about reality.

God, self, Jesus, or *emptiness*—these instances of naming feel harmless at first because naming creates a context for understanding. But the Buddha and Patañjali do not just offer a context but rather push the limits further by using the idea of "śūnya" not as a final place or resting point or ontological axiom but rather as a means for seeing how our use of language restricts and shuts down experience by reifying it. Language is the framework within which we render our experience meaningful and represent what we have felt. We refract and embody our experience with words and ideas. These words and ideas are usually grounded in some faith that something about this path we are embarking on is going to offer some peace, some kind of transformation, and thus words become clusters of assumptions, expectation, and cultural representations of the mystical

experience. When we have a direct experience of being present, it is usually interrupted by a mind that comes in and says, “I am completely present right now.” The mind always comes in and uses language and cultural symbols to articulate the experience of nonduality. The problem is that whenever the experience is articulated, we are pulled out of it.

When we use the word *emptiness,* we think of a void or the experience of no-self. We also associate the terms *emptiness* and *no-self* with a distinctly Buddhist context. But these terms are used in yoga in similar ways, and though they are often misunderstood by teachers or avoided altogether, it is important to consider them in the context of the yoga path as they have compelling and practical value. The job of language, like the job of yoga itself, is to create and enlarge a true understanding of oneself and the nature of reality. Terms such as *śūnyatā,* or even terms like *soul* or *god*, are only useful inasmuch as they are treated as tools rather than as end points of doctrine. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in an inscription in the copy of *Duino Elegies* that he gave to his Polish translator, writes,

> Happy are those who know:
> Behind all words, the Unsayable stands;
> And from that source, the Infinite
> Crosses over to gladness, and us.
>
> Free of those bridges we raise
> With constructed distinctions;
> So that always, in each separate joy,
> We gaze at the single, wholly mutual core.[2]

Emptiness is not the negation or elimination of a sense of self but actually the state of being in one’s true nature. Although we privilege the term *emptiness,* in the same way as terms like *samādhi* or *enlightenment,* emptiness is actually a tool, a strategy, rather than a final, monumental state. Emptiness is not a holy utopia; it is simply a way of describing a letting go, a loss, a falling away of that which keeps us separate from others, the world, and even ourselves. Emptiness is a tool we use that breaks clinging, especially clinging to notions of a solid and substantial world, and thus a solid sense of “me” at the center. The *Rig-Veda* states:

> There was neither non-existence nor existence then….There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day.[3]

It continues with a humbling paradox:

> Who really knows?…The gods came afterwards with the creation of the universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?[4]

The hymn then concludes with an even more astonishing question:

> Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself—or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know.[5]

"Perhaps he does not know" ends the debate. The question is allowed to remain a question. How flexible really and how expansive, to allow the central axiom of your metaphysical system and worldview be nothing other than the questioning of your basic questions. This is not pluralism but rather a very deep insight into the psychology of belief, the basis of our faith. Since what we believe determines the kind of world we perceive and the kinds of actions we take, if we multiply our belief systems by zero (*śūnya*), we arrive in an open field of perception.

When the Upaniṣads later comment on the Vedas, and the reader is asked once again to consider whether the ultimate reality is "this" or "that," the Upaniṣads offer again *neti, neti* (not like this, not like that). Suffering arises from attachment to views. When we cut into the heart of our psychology, we find at the base many attachments. Different perspectives on all matters of life, from "Who am I?" to "How did this begin?" and "How and where will it end?" are valuable as instruments to work with, but the answers derived from such questions are not to be venerated in and of themselves.

So, in what state of mind do we want to move through the world today? *Emptiness* is a utilitarian term, not a description of a sacred space or a claim of truth. Emptiness as a tool helps us to clear away that which cuts us off from the web of life we are always immersed in. Emptiness is about creating space in our relationship to ourselves, through which we can free the mind from fixations that isolate and reduce us to the scale of a self-referential ego. When there is space,

we find ourselves in the midst of life rather than entangled in a solipsistic experience of self around which life pivots. Svarūpa śūnya is a teaching or strategy that aims to dismantle our belief in the substantiality of what we perceive, especially the belief that at the center of personality is a substantial or essential “me.”

This “me” is a holdover, conceptually speaking, from the past. It is not untrue that there is a self-referential mechanism in the mind, but what is untrue is its permanence and substantiality. Past and present as noticed in the mind are just mind states of past and present. This shows us that at the heart of the world, in the center of our conception of personality, at the base of our worldviews and metaphysical stories, is a reality not bound by our stories and ideas. We find at the center of reality, a reality without center.

Before my eldest son was born, his mother and I had a few ideas for names. Once he was born, it seemed somehow obvious that one of the names we had in mind, Arlyn, would fit well. It was exciting giving this new creature, this new person, a name. Yet it also felt odd adding a name to the emerging life that we had just created, though it was by all conventions appropriate. For the first few days I couldn’t get used to it. It wasn’t the particular name we had chosen; rather it was the fact that we were overlaying this new baby with a fixed term. He was not his name.

When you ask yourself the question “Who am I?” and then allow yourself to observe what happens from a place of stillness, you can see how self-constructed our ideas of self are. When we can probe the thoughts and feelings and sense of self that arise from asking, the less it becomes possible to identify anything in particular in the changing field of perception that we consider self. Is the breath mine? Am I the one who breathes? Who is that? Are sounds mine? Is the ear mine? Is the body mine? Are feelings in the body mine? Where is this thing called “me”?

In a conventional sense, of course, it is important to have an idea of who one is and where the “I” begins and others end, even if this is only a malleable and fluid definition. Still, I need to know who I am as opposed to who you are, or my psychological world will be in chaos. Obviously influences we have come in contact with and choices we made in the past combine with biology and what we inherited to give us unique characteristics. These characteristics, in a relative sense, define us. Yet we tend to hold on to that identity and think of it as something separate and apart.

Through exploring the nature of each moment in meditation, we begin to see that what we thought was rigid and solid is actually impermanent and interdependent. The concrete sense of "I" begins to break down. It becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint anything—a feeling, perception, sensation, thought—as essentially "me."

When he describes the technique of *dharma megha samādhi* Patañjali suggests one finds a field in which the building blocks of our experience seem to be impermanent, in constant flux. He says, "One can see that the flow [of reality] is actually a series of discreet events, each corresponding to the merest instance of time, in which one form becomes another."[6]

When we see that the fundamental qualities of nature are always changing and that anything that is perceivable is also changing, how is it possible to fix one point and call it "me"? Emptiness is the essential "un-findability" of everything. It is the almost infinite depth you find when you begin to probe with questions such as "Who am I?" or "What am I?" or "What is this?" No matter how deeply and acutely you search for "me" in mind and body, it escapes. If the mind as a microscope looks for the essence of "me," it will get lost. But such a loss is revealing—it is the opening in the screen of everyday life that reveals a path or dimension that is not something and also not nothing. Yet there is nothing to be found. So, what at first seems like loss becomes something to cultivate. Emptiness is not found as void or as nothing, but it is also not found as something.

This of course may seem confusing, but remember always that emptiness is a tool designed to dislodge the tendency in the mind toward the belief that things are substantial, real, and reliable. It's an opening up to the experience that the "I," the body, or even the mind are not actually reducible to some particular thing. Probing does not mean we arrive at nothing. In yoga we always move from that which is known to that which is unknown. We use the known in order to find its edges. At the edges of the known, life reveals itself, because we have arrived at the limits of knowledge, the limits of understanding.

We move in the body in this way also—from comfortable ways of walking and talking toward that which is outside of habitual parameters. We begin looking into what is known about the body or the breath so that when we push it further—such as when we hold a posture for an extended period of time—we lose our sense of it and are left with a direct experience of the posture. We use the form of the posture to experience śūnyatā, or boundlessness. Śūnyatā is freedom

beyond the reach of karma, a body beyond the reach of preference, movement without self-image.

We use yoga postures to wake up the five *buddhindriya*s (sense capacities) of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting, and smelling, the five corresponding *karmedriya*s (action capacities) of speaking, holding, walking, excreting, and procreating, along with the five *tanmātra*s (subtle material elements) as sensed by the mind-body as sound, touch, form, taste, and smell. These capacities, actions, and material elements are all products of the five *mahābhūta*s (gross material elements) of space, wind, fire, water, air, and earth.

Whether from a cosmological or an individual perspective, consciousness is intimately tied up with the body, which is dependent for its existence on the basic constituent elements in nature.

When we look at the primary constituents of mental and physical experience, like a scientist studying the substratum of matter, we realize we will not arrive at a final conclusion or dissolve into nothingness. Every layer of reality that we explore reveals yet another layer, more nuanced, complex, and mysterious. We look deeply into the breath and we find the air element, and when there is a release in a breathing pattern, we immediately sense space. We study muscles, and fascia is revealed. We study fascia, and other physical holding patterns are revealed. We study physiology, and psychology is revealed, and we study psychology, and the nature of mind is revealed. This process keeps going and going, and the deeper we investigate, the closer we come to unraveling the mystery of life and its processes. The more we look at something, the less we come to know about it. We are confronted at every turn of experience not by hard facts but by the possibility of intimacy.

When we become intimate with what we perceive, we experience life unmediated by the hardened narrative of self. From there we find ourselves open to an otherness that is no longer outside of our experience but right at the heart of pure being. We experience how the body is a conglomeration of conditions, including mind and breath, which has nothing at all to do with self-image. At last we come to the heart of yoga—an intimacy in which we find ourselves in the vast circle of life, cherishing all aspects of life equally, and committed to the renewal of our best resources: awareness, kindness, and loving action.

Hands Down

We plant our hands on the earth in Downward-Facing Dog pose, fingers outstretched like giant webs supporting elevated hips and long legs. Think about the number of times you have practiced Downward-Facing Dog pose. At first, as beginners, we suffer through the posture, simply learning how to put our hands squarely on the yoga mat as we exhale and lift our pelvis away from the floor. Then, as we learn more techniques and the body becomes accustomed to the posture, we find comfort or relative stability in the pose. But as we delve deeper into the pose, perhaps several decades later, the posture becomes mysterious again.

I recall studying with Richard Freeman. We started a ten-day session by exploring Downward-Facing Dog. We practiced the pose for a whole morning until all our thoughts about Downward-Facing Dog became irrelevant. Over and over, we went deeper and deeper into the pose until we were in the posture with no ideas about it. Just pure experience. On the last day of this ten-day session, he returned again to Downward Dog. All afternoon we explored the pose from different perspectives and entry points until the entire workshop dissolved into immediate physical experience. The mind had no ideas about the posture anymore. The mind and body were like one big question mark. How can we continually practice like this? How can we turn the mind and body into a process rather than a system of knowledge, always questioning, always inquiring within?

Inquiry is infinite. Emptiness is the infinite nature of inquiry. Emptiness is emptying, a releasing of certain attachments. What we are emptying ourselves of is our bias and perspective. But it is not simply letting go of a perspective in the way we might let go of a cherished idea, though that is helpful. Rather, letting go of our perspective means letting go of a particular hold or grip we have on something. It is not perspective or viewpoint that is the problem but how tightly we hold on to that perspective. The key is to find a way to see a perspective as simply a perspective. Even though we often hold on to one view without considering the multitude available to us, a view is always just one of an infinite number of views.

Here is an exchange between the nondualist teacher Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj and a visitor:

> Maharaj: As a matter of fact, mind is a universal dynamic principle, but we restrict it to the limits of the body and then depend on it—hence all the trouble. Consider the water in Lake Tansa. That water belongs to the whole of Bombay. Out of that water, can we claim some as yours or

mine? In a similar vein, understand that the self is universal. But you have conditioned it by confining it to the body; therefore, you face problems. This self is also termed Ishvara—God—the Universal Principle. If you hold on to that, profound knowledge will descend upon you and you will have peace.

Visitor: I try to meditate on that, but the mind wanders here and there. If I try to remain indifferent to mind, it will be a long-drawn-out process.

Maharaj: But are you not the root of any process?

Visitor: The root of everything is life.

Maharaj: Yes, but the life force is universal and not personalized. Once you realize this, you have no more troubles.[7]

Perhaps ancient Indian thought did not have modern ideas of biology, but there was the idea that we drop into the world with the tendency toward grasping. Grasping is the root of whatever becomes a belief or an opinion. Grasping feels as though it is not a mental or physical choice but somehow instinctual as a survival mechanism. It comes with the biological organism. But trying to hold on to something in the midst of an impermanent and fluctuating world only creates duḥkha.

Recently when I was with my son I offered him some banana. He sat in his high chair, devoured the banana, and asked for more. I got up to get another banana and then looked back at his smiling and insatiable grin. He has huge Dizzy Gillespie cheeks, and each was puffed full and smeared with banana. He had banana all over his face, squished over his table, and two hands that oozed with banana. And still he wanted more. Since his mouth was full, he couldn't even say so, but the look in his eyes telegraphed a desire for even more banana. In his small form, he was embodying a grasping desire we have all felt. Although it's easy to idealize the goal of yoga as being able to be as present as a child, we forget sometimes that kids come into the world with a great deal of clinging. We are born clinging.

That is why yoga is not about setting up a new belief system but using the teaching to learn about how we grasp. From there we use the techniques offered to us by yoga to learn how to let go.

We tend to separate life into categories and concepts that create a fragmented and split experience. This is natural and may not be a bad thing in and of itself,

but we often don't see or we ignore the fact that these splits are conceptual categories. Though this may be a necessary action to keep our society functioning as it is, this blindness leads us into a fictional realm that we confuse with what is real. When things are fixed, they are closed, and closure inevitably becomes inflexibility and suffering.

The debate about yoga, Hinduism, and Buddhism often becomes focused around the definition of self. At first glance, the Buddhist notion of no-self contradicts the Hindu teaching on ātman and Brahman, the essential self. But on closer investigation, the pre-Buddhist "self" is not what one thinks. It is actually beyond linguistic conceptualization and has no form or qualities. The teachings on emptiness or ātman are strategies rather than final metaphysical truths. When we treat these concepts as strategies, we avoid the pitfall of confusing a technique with fantasies of ultimate truth. As theologian Don Cupitt writes,

> Of these fixed points, the idea of the Self is one of the most important. We want to imagine that there is a Real Me, a substance, something enduring and self-identical in us that transcends the flux of life. However, for so long as we believe in any fixed points outside the flux of life, we will be incapable of Glory and afraid of death. Life is outsideless. Glory means giving up all ideas of substance, all absolutes and things outside time, and losing our Selves in the flux of life. Jesus seems to compare "eternal life" with the way birds and flowers live, meaning that if we who are spirit can achieve the same exact coincidence with our own pure contingency that comes so naturally to the lily and the bird, then, we shall have eternal life. Death's sting is drawn.[8]

Even yoga texts such as the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭa* describe this paradox without clinging to a final view on the matter: "Awareness of course has no distinct form….It is known as the mind, the true self or emptiness."[9]

We can always set up a vocabulary that names experience in different ways—as sacred, divine, soul, spirit, self—but these distinctions are mere appearances, not the actuality of insight or wisdom, and always come after the facts of experience. In essence these are just words to describe an experience that cannot be described with words. The ultimate truth of things is timeless, but it is a truth rooted in human experience, not a holy book or mystical system someone far away achieved in a culture now unknown to us. In order for a teaching to have

liberatory value, it has to be knowable in the life of you and I. Yoga has to be known and absorbed directly. That is why we begin by always turning the mind to such simple things as the breath at this moment, the body as it's felt now. All the advanced techniques of yoga are present in these two simple dictums: breathe your circumstances, and stay in the body. Nobody can do these things for us; they demand our attention in our life here and now.

When the mind, body, and nervous system settle down and interest in the investigation of experience increases, inner and outer life open in texture and detail. Even though the mind tries to grasp after finality and certainty, you continue to work toward the next stage of practice, which is the gradual development of wisdom (*prajña*). Wisdom is the ability to suspend knowledge (*jñāna*) and is the antidote to the distortions and illusions that plant most of the seeds of suffering. Wisdom, in the context of the kleṣas, is the embodied understanding of the unsatisfactoriness of whatever is impermanent as well as the way we are driven by attachment to pleasure (*raga*) and aversion (*dveṣa*) to what is not pleasurable. Wisdom is knowing the extent to which self-identity is manufactured and then projected onto all experience. Wisdom helps us see how self-construction hinders a spontaneous and ethical response to life and the great questions it presents. We have a moral obligation to wake up with wisdom.

20. Yoga, Death, and Dying

WHAT IS MOST ASTOUNDING?

IN THE EPIC Indian story called the *Mahābhārata,* the sage Yuddhiṣṭhira is asked, "Of all things in life, what is the most astounding?" to which Yuddhiṣṭhira responds, "that a person, seeing others die all around him, never thinks that he will die."

One of the deepest pains of being human is the realization that every aspect of life is undergoing constant change and that everything once born is then subject to decay and death. What becomes a singular life also passes away, and in this way the singular is seen to be part of a much larger, pulsing whole. And each body in contact with its environment runs a specific course, a unique path of aging. Yet there is a deep unwillingness, especially in our culture, to look at aging directly. To accept aging and dying brings us face-to-face with our ongoing and unconscious repression of the awareness of the end of our lives. Aging is an opportunity to develop one's curiosity regarding the course of life this body takes.

Yoga demands that we look the serpent right in the mouth until we see it has no poison. We have the capacity to be present even when death squeezes the last exhalation from the body. It need not terrify us even though it is a great letting go, which as we have examined in detail, is what we most struggle with. In the face of death, there is nothing left to avoid and certainly nothing left to hold on to.

There is a wonderful story that speaks to this in the *Srimad Bhagavatam,* a collection of eighteen thousand verses about the lives of avatars, yogis, sages, and kings. In the story the sage Narada teaches a very basic truth to a confused king:

> All worldly identifications and all attachments that pass as relationships are fraught with sorrow. All relationships are conceptual. They appear and disappear like a palace in the clouds. On account of inherent

> tendencies that come to life at birth, people think of all objects, relationships and selves as real and indulge in action rooted in this ignorance.

The king, further confused by this statement, responds by asking Narada why people keep clinging and how to overcome these attachments and delusions. Narada responds,

> The one direct cause for people's sorrow is their deluded sense that the body is the self. One clings to the body as one's own. Correct and diligent investigation into the nature of the self is the only sure cure for this malady.

On hearing this, the king regains his balance of mind. He realizes that what he was most attached to was his sense of self and his identification with his body, and that as long as he identified the impermanent body as being owned by his own sense of self, he remained outside of reality, because he thought of others as separate.[1]

The "I" has nothing to cling to, because all experiences are impermanent. We can easily observe this by watching the sensations come and go or the thoughts appear and disappear. Yoga reminds us again and again that, having been born, we are subject to aging and an inevitable death. Some of us might avoid old age, but only by dying young. Others of us might be the picture of health and never get sick. Yet sooner or later everyone's body will succumb to death. Although we all know this, we cannot know where or when it will happen. In this, as in all things, life is an ever-evolving matrix of intertwined and mysterious conditions.

Contemporary culture does not give many incentives for contemplating our own mortality. In the yoga tradition however, the teachings ask a basic question: If death is inevitable, why wait until the last moments of life to contemplate it? When someone becomes sick or dies, it is a chance for us to recognize that this can happen to us at any time. Why not in this moment? This is why we go into *savāsanā* (Corpse pose), or as Pattabhi Jois calls it, "Practicing death, a little bit every day."

Aging and death bring urgency to practice. Practicing it prompts us to ask questions such as: If the time of death does come soon, what will I regret not having done? Am I living my life fully? Do I use every moment as something to

learn from?

When a friend, who is struggling with cancer, described her recent chemotherapy session, she said to me,

> Many people assume that the experience of cancer is overwhelmingly negative, and many people living with cancer feel that their experience of cancer should conform to this concept of negativity. Yes, cancer and the treatment for it can be terrible. But cancer is also amazing, because to say that cancer is only terrible is to separate it from all of life that surrounds it. The beautiful people you meet in waiting rooms, the support and generosity of family and friends, the diligent and thoughtful care by so many professionals, the unique opportunity for reflection and contemplation—there is an entire experience of life while we are experiencing cancer. When we say cancer is terrible, where does cancer the terrible end and all these wonderful side effects we call life begin? All of life with cancer is cancer, and all of cancer is life. Cancer and life are not separate and not distinct. So, we can't categorize our experience. We can just experience it for what it is.[2]

Looking at experiences of illness and death helps us appreciate one another in a very different way than we are accustomed to. With mindfulness, there is a resolution to be more sensitive, more careful. It's like driving in the snow; we take greater care because we know our situation is fragile. We don't need to get frustrated with the fact of the snow, because the snow comes whether we want it to or not. So, all we can really do is take great care with how we drive. We can see the snow as an incentive to be present, mindful, and fully aware. So it can be with illness, aging, and death.

However, for most of us it is much easier to evaluate experience than it is to accept it. Even in subtle ways, it is hard to allow each moment to be full or enough. Even to let ourselves be ourselves without persona or attachment, simply being for the sake of being, is difficult. But isn't the heart of acceptance rooted in our own hearts? What would it mean to accept every aspect of ourselves and others? In the contemplation of death, we come to see that we don't need to get things right; instead we can begin to accept each moment just as it is. We can let others be as others are.

Often when we hear the word acceptance, we think of surrender or sacrifice.

But nothing is unacceptable and so we are not actually giving up. Even the greatest suffering in the world or the strongest currents of pain within can be accepted. Acceptance doesn't mean liking something or agreeing with it. Rather it is allowing something to be, not shutting it out. Yoga is the practice of allowing things to be as they are without turning away from any part. If I am in a situation I can't bear, then it is the unbearable that is to be accepted.

Awareness simply reflects what is present. It reveals all that is there without comment or comparison. By accepting our aging just as it is, we allow for all that we are. How do we do this? By being with our experience directly. In aging and illness, even in pain, we notice how we react in each moment. Are we holding on? Are we pushing away? How does this moment feel in the body? Are we contracting or pulling away? When there is contraction, we can't see clearly, because contracting is a form of turning away. When we contract, we cannot possibly notice how things are, because we are blocking out our experience at both a sensual and a mental level.

We don't need to make aging, illness, or death different than other aspects or phases of life. We can be with the state of what is, even if what is, is fear, pain, or despair. We can do this if we can give that state space without turning from it.

All the repression of our intrinsic awareness of impermanence eventually must yield a release. Though we have a thousand and one strategies to guard against death's arrival, still it comes. The symptoms of such repression manifest often as a deep and outward need for security. Whether we seek the material security of capital, the relational security of romantic love, the ego's security in fame and notoriety, it really makes no difference.

If we can give a state space rather than struggling with it, things begin to settle down on their own. The energy that was defending the self from unfolding awareness can go toward other things. It can flow as it needs to. We can practice *satya* (honesty) with the body. We can see the aging body for what it is. We can be with the mind state that is there without trying to create a new one. When we see everything clearly, it is easier to act wisely and accept the reality of our circumstances. Liberation from delusion means the release of the energies we expend trying to deny death.

No matter how fixed and concrete they appear on the surface, mind states, like the ongoing sensations of the body, are always loosening and passing away. The *Ashtavakra Gītā,* one of the many anonymous Indian teachings or folktales known as *purāṇa*s, describes this with great clarity:

All things arise,
Suffer change,
And pass away.
This is their nature.
When you know this…
…you become still.
It is easy.[3]

We expend so much energy avoiding the way life actually unfolds, and most of the time we are not aware that we are doing this. This is exhausting. When we begin to see that there can be spaciousness where there was resistance, the contents of consciousness lose some of their hold on us. Each time we make space, trust grows. The more we trust reality, the weaker the mind's habits of aversion become.

Trusting in this practice is a form of training the heart. Being interested in yoga is being interested in the heart and its opening. In practice, we work to include rather than exclude. Most of us have been through enough suffering, joy, and a whole range of emotions in between to know that unless there is a context for our experience, we cannot expand and change. Sometimes I think practice is a way of setting life in context. Certainly many of our psychological ills are more meaningful and manageable when seen in the context of spiritual practice. With context and practice, living becomes more than chaos or more than a routine without solace. The heart knows that life is more than that, and strangely this provokes the ego into a kind of anxiousness. Because when we find a way to see the self as a changing and impermanent mechanism rather than an ongoing "thing" in space and time, we see also that anxiety is central to the ego, because it is the self's response to its own groundlessness.

The heart is not just a location or an intellectual place but rather the greater part of us. It has the ability to feel freedom within changing conditions. As a metaphor in yoga terminology and physiology, the heart is bright and peaceful but only because it is "unstruck" by the reality of change. What creates our "problems" is the way that we identify with and cling to that which moves through the heart. Identification is the root of clinging. If you understand that, you find the heart of practice. If there is clinging, there is dissatisfaction. If there is no clinging, there is no suffering. In one of the last poems he wrote, called "Late Fragment," Raymond Carver offers this truth in concise terms:

And did you get what
You wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
Beloved on the earth.[4]

What yoga teaches us is to stop looking outside the heart for satisfaction. We are so clever at finding external reasons to perpetuate our habits, because even if we see that our habits cause us distress, we keep repeating them because they are known. This is why we practice. Time by itself does not heal these kinds of illusions. If they are not seen directly, time just entrenches them further. We need a strong commitment to letting go and to paying attention to the clinging involved in difficult mental and physical states. Practicing acceptance of aging and death is a good way to start.

Just as a scientist who studies interdependence cannot bring an entire ecosystem into a laboratory, we cannot, on the surface, examine all the facets of existence at once. However, when you focus intently on something as simple as the breath or the changing (*pariṇāma*) sensations in the body—what Patañjali calls *dharma megha samādhi*—we get a sense of the truths of existence, especially the truth of change.

When we inspect our everyday experience in detail, we see that death and birth occur one after the other in every successive moment. What we see in one breath cycle we see everywhere. When we practice sincerely, what we want in life becomes simpler and simpler.

When we inspect our moment-to-moment experience, we find we are not permanent objects or selves but perceptual elements coming together and coming apart. Some schools of yoga refer to this as the *guna*s—the changing particles that make up the substratum of experience. But there is nothing gluing this ebb and flow together except for the ability to see these patterns as just ebbing and flowing. What comes together always comes apart. All the basic patterns, constituents, or elements in nature come together and come apart. There is nothing to hold on to and nothing to which we can ascribe selfhood. These building blocks, like atoms, are not “things” that exist but rather the smallest particles of perception available to us. If you look at one moment of sensation in the body, for example, you can see it as a constantly changing configuration of

elements.

As far as we know, nobody has been able to escape death. Of the current world population of some seven and a half billion people, almost none will be alive in a hundred years' time. Not only do our thoughts, relationships, and bodies have a time limit, so do our conceptions of ourselves. We are in constant motion. Life has a definite, inflexible limit, and each moment brings us closer to its finality. We are dying from the moment we are born.

Impermanence teaches us that death comes in a moment and that its time is unexpected. All that separates us from the next life is one breath. When we are born, our first autonomous gesture after leaving the womb is an inhale. When we die, we leave the world on an exhale. In between these two breaths is an uncertain life span. The young can die before the old, the healthy before the sick. The physical body contributes to life's seeming certainty, but its weakness and fragility also reveal its uncertainty. Worldly possessions can't help our position in the face of death and dying. Relatives and friends can neither prevent death nor go with us. Even our own precious body is of no help to us. We have to leave it behind like a shell, an empty husk, an overcoat. The form of the body will eventually come apart, like a seed fallen from a tree, only to have that material come together again under different conditions in yet another form.

In yoga practice, as we become more and more familiar with the patterns and movements of the breath, we come into contact with the basic constituents of our experience. The basic elements of reality are called by various names in different systems—*guna*s, *kośa*s, *skandha*s, *prakṛti, prāṇa vāyuu*—but all have the same purpose, namely, to offer us tools or strategies we can use to eventually accept the changing reality in which we find ourselves. We see in the elements no place to cling and nowhere to identify an "I, me, or mine." This process of meditation teaches the practitioner the stages of death and the mind-body relationships behind them. Treating death as something we practice helps us loosen attachments, learn how to live with more freedom, and begin to treat death as a process of release.

The description of the dying process in most Indian texts is based on a presentation of the winds (*vāyuu*), or currents of energy, that serve as foundations for various levels of consciousness, and the channels in which they flow.

The physiology of death revolves around changes in the winds and one's attitude in the process of dying. Since the mind is intimately linked with the winds of the breath, we watch them both. Psychologically, due to the fact that

consciousness of varying grossness or subtlety depends on the winds, like a rider on a horse, their dissolving or loss of ability to serve as bases of consciousness induces radical changes in conscious experience.

Upon the serial collapse of the ability of these winds to serve as bases of consciousness, the internal and external events of death unfold. Through the power of meditation, the yogi makes the coarse winds dissolve into the very subtle life-bearing wind at the heart. Thus, yoga mirrors the process that occurs at death and involves concentration on the psychic channels and their centers (*chakras*) inside the body. Each chakra is a platform upon which physical and mental health are based.

Death begins with the sequential dissolution of the winds associated with the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air). "Earth" refers to the hard factors of the body, such as bone, and the dissolution of the wind associated with it means that that wind is no longer capable of serving as a mount, or basis for consciousness. As a consequence of its dissolution, the capacity of the wind associated with "water" (the fluid factors of the body) to act as a mount for consciousness becomes more manifest. The cessation of capacity in one element and its greater manifestation in another is called "dissolution." What happens is not, therefore, a case of gross earth dissolving into water. Rather, simultaneous with the dissolution of the earth element, the other elements also begin to sequentially return to their respective base in the natural world.

All the elements can be found in any phenomenon in nature, whether internal or external. When one pays attention to the body in yoga posture practice, one is meditating on the elements. The earth element, much like the outer sheath of the first kośa, is characteristic of hardness, felt experience, heaviness, density, and defined space. As one begins dying, the bones become heavy, the skin pale, the eyes become difficult to open, and the sensory grasp of the world begins to slip away. As we meditate on the earth element in the form of the body, we feel the body slipping away, color withdrawing from the skin, and a loss of control.

As the earth element transforms, we come into contact with the water element. Hearing begins to fade, the fluids of the body are out of our control, saliva drips from the mouth, water appears at the corners of the eyes, and it becomes difficult to hold urine. The lips become chapped, the nostrils cave into the septum, the eyes become very dry, and the fluids that characterize the water element dissolve into the fire element. Death chips away at everything bit by bit.

The fire element withdraws, and the body becomes cool and stiff, the breath

becomes cold, the nose no longer smells scent, and digestion is no longer possible. As the characteristics of heat leave the body, we see signs of the dissolution of the air element as the out-breath grows longer and longer and the senses begin to fade away. Other people are no longer recognizable to the dying person. There is no longer a sense of interest or purpose in the mind, and the ability to perceive begins to fade away completely. Death is always whispering a reminder, however quietly, that there is nothing at all we can cling to as ultimately our own; and in such awareness, life flows along transparently like a bank-less stream.

When volition is completely given up, the dissolution of the air element becomes prominent; there is nowhere to go and nothing to do. The in-breath becomes shorter and shorter; the out-breath elongates and so does the pause at the bottom of each breath cycle. The pressures of meaning and purpose, the expectations of being somebody going somewhere, no longer trouble the mind. Gravity reigns. Joan Halifax, in her research working with the dying, describes this process in detail:

> As the element of air is dissolved, you are having visions. Your visions may be jewel-like and filled with insight that can never be expressed. These visions relate to who you are and how you have lived your life. You may be seeing your family or your ancestors in a peaceful setting. You may be seeing beautiful people, saints, or friends welcoming you. You may be reliving pleasant experiences from your past. Or you may have demonic and hellish visions. If you have hurt others, those whom you have injured may appear to you. Difficult and dreadful moments of your life may arise to haunt you. You may see people with whom you have had negative interactions attacking you. You may even cry out in fear. Do not identify with these visions. Simply let them be.[5]

When the air element dissolves, there is nothing left to do. Mental functioning comes to an end and so does consciousness. Consciousness dissolves into space, there is no sensation in the body, the last exhalation occurs, and the element of wind dissolves completely. The kośas are extinguished, and the elements of mind and body return to their source in the ongoing flux of nature.

We imagine this practice as a description of our own death so that we can release our own unique identity into the greater, ongoing universe. Returning these particles called “self” back to their source, even if we have no words for such a source, helps loosen our fixations and entanglements.

It took life on earth billions of years to establish itself, and here we are, moving about, sustained by that billion-year evolution and eventually disappearing back into it. This is the greater evolution: continuity with the genetic and molecular functioning of this immense planetary system of which we are only small parts indeed.

When teaching, I almost always read the instructions for dying or these descriptions of the elements during the ten minutes of savāsanā (Corpse pose) when the students are lying down, the room is dark, and the collective breath is coming into stillness. If not treated as a practice of dying, savāsanā is reduced to a relaxation exercise and divorced from its purpose as a meditation on impermanence and, by extension, gratitude.

The contemplation of impermanence and nonattachment, coupled with a meditation on the elements, is not only a meditation on finality—it is also a way of placing the practitioner of yoga in the midst of life. When we complete an exhalation or blink our eyes, this moment of experience is over. In a sense, it has died. Every moment of perception passes away. Being present with the changing nature of reality is in itself a meditation on death, because we are being asked as practitioners to allow each and every moment to pass away. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa states:

> When, because of disease or advanced age, one is neither able to perform one's duties, study philosophy, or pursue spiritual knowledge, one should begin to fast. Properly placing the fires (of the body) within oneself and relinquishing the notion of "I" and "mine," one should then completely merge the aggregate elements into their causes. The knower of the self (should merge) the apertures of the body into space, the vital airs into the air, the heat into fire, the blood, phlegm and pus into water, and the rest into earth, from whence they came. One should place one's speech and subject matter of speaking into Agni, the two hands and their crafting capacity into Indra, the feet and their power of movement into Visnu, the Spirit of time, the genitals and sexual enjoyment into Prajapati, the anus and its power of evacuation into Mrtyu, directing each into their proper place. One should merge the sense of hearing, along with sound, in the directions, tactility with the sense of touch into the wind, and form along with vision, O King, into the sun. One should merge the tongue, along with the sense of taste, into water, and fragrance, along with the sense of smell, into earth.

> Mind, along with desires, into the Moon, intelligence, along with its objects, into the supreme seer (Brahma), actions and self-awareness into Rudra, from who proceeds the action of egotism and self-interest, existence and thought into the individual (knower of the field), and the individual along with the qualities of nature into the Supreme. Earth in water, water in fire, the latter in air, that into space, that into ego, and the latter into the totality of matter, that into the unmanifest, and that into the undying, imperishable. Thus, knowing the imperishable self to be made of consciousness without a second, one should come to an end, like a fire that has devoured its origins.[6]

This description of death practice leads to the separation of the elements. Traditionally one would meditate separately on each sentence in the aforementioned description not only at the end of life but as a daily meditation. This type of practice is found consistently in meditation-based religious traditions. As we know, when the elements separate, they then come back together in some different form. Molecules continue, water flows and evaporates only to flow again. There is an elemental configuration of ourselves in all things. So, what truly dies?

Each aspect of life has an intrinsic value when we pay attention. Each point in the infinitely broad net of Indra connects, mirrors, and exists in interdependence with all other points of reality. Closer than sisters or brothers, each aspect of this wide and complex web of life supports and conditions the basic constituent pieces that, when assembled, feel like a self. Though hard to fathom and even harder to practice, there is a fundamental unity that connects not only parts of the body or parts of the mind but each of us to every living and nonliving particle of existence. Each part of this existence has a value as part of an ultimate reality. To let go of oneself in the fullness of the rain, in the pain of loss, in the joy of feeling loved is to be part of this ultimate reality. Within change there is connection. Within the many there is one. There is nothing that stands between self and the world, even if the world seems outside of our minds and bodies. Yoga teaches us that the world of the mind is the world of the body, and that the two are neither two nor one. Enlightenment is not something someone hands to you atop a mountain, or something you one day attain, but an offering of centerless responsiveness through the realization of who we truly are. Mokṣa, or true freedom, is the experience of an authorless life into and out of which all things are created and completed.

The term *mokṣa* originally referred to the last phase of an eclipse, where one body begins to move out of the shadow of another. In a solar eclipse, for example, when the moon and hidden sun start to draw away from one another, revealing again the blazing sun, darkness lifts, and the two bodies move in their respective spheres. Like the last phase of an eclipse, *mokṣa* refers to the freedom that occurs when one creates the conditions in mind and body for the dissolution of the five kleṣas and the end of suffering.

The radical theologian Don Cupitt writes,

> We seem to have forgotten how to die. We have come to equate religion with holding on, when we ought to have been learning to see religion as teaching us how to let go. Religious belief should be producing a self-emptying way of life: we live by dying, unattached, pouring ourselves out into the flux of life in such a way that death when it comes is not a threat but a consummation.
>
> We should live as the sun does. Its existence, the process by which it lives, and the process by which it dies, all exactly coincide. It believes nothing, it hasn't a care, it just pours itself out.[7]

When we give attention to the way the body and mind are made of elements, it becomes easy to see impermanence. When we pay attention to the way the elements come together and when we stay with the changing nature of each element in and of itself, it is hard to find anything to cling to or call ours. This eliminates the delusion of our ordinary perceptual attitude that the body continues in space and time. It reveals afresh the impermanence of this body.

The only thing Patañjali says about the body at the time of death is as follows: "Once the body dies and is gone, its basic patterns are dissolved in nature and inclined to be reborn."[8]

Rebirth is different in this sense from a theory of reincarnation. With reincarnation, "I" get somehow incarnated in a different form or in a future life, whereas in Patañjali's reference to the body at death, he says that something continues without hinting at what. In other words, as the elements separate, they return to their form as basic patterns of nature.

If buried, the skin decomposes and is eaten by worms. The worms in turn die and return to the earth element. Out of this flowers bloom and are pollinated by bees. Alternately, if the body is burned, the smoke from the body mixes with the

earth element, as do the ashes, and the cycle of those particles continues. In all of this, what does not continue is the story of self. So, if that story, which is what is most tenuously held on to (*abhiniveśa*) dissolves at death, why not begin its dissolution ourselves, now?

We can imagine it as a puzzle. If death is inevitable, then the only thing we can change, once born, is birth. How can we change birth once we are born? By simply ceasing to construct a self through which we filter our experiences. In this way, we die into life. What then dies but our self-constructions?

When you move the body with the breath, you are meditating in action on the way the elements operate in the body. We stretch the breath through the elements in the same way that we press the breath through the kośas. Like the five elements, the kośas are perceptual glasses through which we can gain insight into the impermanent and contingent nature of the body.

When this same insight is pushed even further, especially in sitting meditation or prāṇāyāma, we see that the body in itself does not actually exist but is a coming together and coming apart of these elemental qualities. It is no longer a body but the arising and passing away of the causes and conditions of the elements. This constant transformation of the elements is described as pariṇāma. *Pariṇāma* refers to the ever-constant change and transformation of the substratum of material existence.

Human beings develop an inordinate number of strategies to fend off awareness of our mortality. It's not just the body that is mortal but also every moment of experience. Every breath, thought, action, and deed is impermanent. Ernest Becker, in his Pulitzer Prize–winning book of 1974, *The Denial of Death,* describes how our most basic activity is the creation of stories about ourselves that avoid the inevitability of facing death.

This psychological denial of death, Becker claims, is one of the most basic drives in individual behavior, and is reflected throughout human culture. Indeed, one of the main functions of culture, according to Becker, is to help us successfully avoid awareness of our mortality. That suppression of awareness plays a crucial role in keeping people functioning—if we were constantly aware of our fragility, of the nothingness we are a split second away from at all times, we'd go insane. And how does culture perform this crucial function? By making us feel certain that we, or realities we are part of, are permanent, invulnerable, eternal. And in Becker's view, some of the personal and social consequences of this are disastrous.

"The practice of dying little by little, every day," Pattabhi Jois said, "brings yoga."[9] Letting go in the face of death turns dying into an act of giving. Dying little by little through giving oneself completely to each and every experience describes in yogic terms how a person can find release from the anxiety and symptoms of repression that go hand in hand with a denial of change. Letting go in each moment helps us to face directly our mortality. An awareness of death can purify our motives.

As we have explored in this book, the personal and relational effects of clinging to permanence create violence, addiction, fear, and suffering. Whenever we deny change and the continual birth and death of each moment, we create suffering. On the personal level, when we ignore our mortality and vulnerability we build up an unreal sense of self, and we then act out of a false sense of who and what we are. So, yoga takes us to a crucial point: the matter of letting death penetrate the self. The acceptance of death, much like being fully engaged in life, is the acceptance of the perishing of everything that will perish. In this acceptance, a person imaginatively and physically experiences the process of the death of the body and the possibility of resting in the unknowability of what comes next. The next moment, even in daily life, is invisible. This body, this ability to be aware, and this precious and complex human intelligence is not self-created but given to itself. It has emerged from the same mysterious ground as everything else. Actualized by the truth of death, we no longer need to move our lives forward by shading experience according to our own ideas. When there is amazement, when there is wonder, then we are present with life and one another. As Patañjali in the *Yoga-Sutra* says, this world, this life, is here only as a phenomenal experience for us to see through it.[10]

Contemplation of death, if thought of only in the context of "me," is depressing and easily slips into nihilism. But a contemplation of death that includes the death of "me," with a heart that's open, invites us to connect with the world, and spontaneously dissolves attachment. Whenever there is attachment, there is no relationship; whenever there is expectation, there is no love. When attachment to our ideas about self is untangled, then automatically there is love, there is compassion. Love occurs when expectation dissolves. Love is the ultimate healer in crisis. Letting go of our viewpoints resolves crisis, and out of that, spontaneously, love occurs, flourishing occurs, and mokṣa occurs. Enlightenment is not someplace far away; it is right here, right now. This practice of yoga is continuously putting us in the present moment, in community. Flourishing is the opposite of nihilism, duḥkha, and the fear of death.

We contemplate death and in doing so discover that existence is participation in a reality that has two distinct dimensions: a dimension of things that perish, and an awareness that seems outside that which changes. Yoga teaches us that the dance of all we perceive happens in front of awareness, not inside or behind it. Awareness is not an "it" or anything that the mind can capture with concepts and words, and even when we rest in the idea that it is not possible to reify pure awareness, the mind comes in and does so anyway, even with terms like *puruṣa, Brahma*, *śūnyāta.* The "practice of dying" is a matter of learning to live the tension "in between" these two dimensions of existence. Again, human existence is not just the life of perishing existence; it is not the existence of a stone or a tree. Neither is it a life of a self-sufficient and permanent being. Human existence is a life always "in between," participating in both because they are complementary opposites, inseparable from each other.

By saying that puruṣa (pure awareness) is unchanging, Patañjali describes the human experience as not exactly bound by death, but rather informed by it. In us, the knowledge of death structures a consciousness that reaches beyond the limits of the perishable, because we come to see that even though everything is changing, that change continues in modified forms beyond any idea of time. Conscious existence is not just mortality plus an extraneous dollop of intelligent awareness; it is a true union of opposites. A human life unfolds within the tenuous domains of perishing and nonperishing reality simultaneously. It is life structured by death. In order to be authentically human, we need to accept the mystery and responsibility of participation in both dimensions of reality that constitute life structured by death.

At the end of the day, there are not two categories of experience, only a mind that sets up two categories. The heart of yoga is the realization of the inherent flow of life within the reality of a conditional existence. This moves us to become better humans. This also returns us once again to the first limb (*yama*) of practice: the responsibility we all share to contribute to peace and flexibility rather than violence and rigidity. If we are to live together in this overpopulated, impermanent, and conflicted world, a meditation on death is a vital antidote to self-centeredness. Yoga teaches us that when we lose our sense of separateness from one another and from the world at large, we become like jewels in Indra's net, all shimmering in union.

Michael Shō Ken Stone: An Appreciation

I FIRST MET Michael Stone when he attended a Zen Precepts Ceremony that I officiated for a group that included a friend of his. He spoke with me after the ceremony, and I recall his penetrating gaze, his intellectual clarity as well as his respectful demeanor and sense of humor. It was the beginning of several years of working with Michael. He generously invited me to offer teaching to his several yoga and meditation groups in Toronto. During that time, Michael and I shared stimulating discussions related to dharma, the arts, politics, and relationships. His lively intellect, generous heart, and quiet vulnerability were apparent to me.

A few years later, Michael asked to take the Zen Buddhist precepts with me. I was a bit surprised as he was already a recognized yoga teacher and scholar, a psychotherapist, and a student of mindfulness. And yet he wanted to take Zen Buddhist vows! Over my commonsense objections, he persisted, and was persuasive. I agreed to serve as his Precept Teacher.

Michael once compared yoga and Buddhism to oak and maple trees: apparently different in color and shape, yet congruent in basic systems of growth and development (*Freeing the Body, Freeing the Mind,* p. xiv). He felt at home and seemed to naturally take in Zen perspectives. He joined our precepts retreat in 2011, receiving the dharma name Shō Ken.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition, during the precepts ceremony, a "dharma name" is given as an encouragement to the receiver. It is a timely opportunity, both for giver and recipient to intimately consider the unique qualities of the one who is committing to a life of ethical and moral principles. In Michael's case, it was not difficult to recognize his lucidity and sincerity. During our work together, Michael's discerning inquiry into the Sanskrit teachings, and his contemporary concerns for the state of the world, of his city, and his community impressed me.

His was not simply a faith-based devotion, but rather a considered and wise discernment.

Thus, the name Shō Ken—meaning "sees clearly." It derives from a key phrase in the Heart Sutra: "Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva clearly sees the emptiness of all the five conditions, thus completely relieving misfortune and pain." My hope was that Michael would continue to see the fragility of all concepts, when to use them and when to put them aside. It is a profound teaching, and one that he integrated in his own teachings. Moreover, a further connection was that the first character, Shō, 照, actually is linked to the Sanskrit *drishti,* the focused gaze of yoga.

Indeed, a daunting challenge—and Michael was up for it. He continued to successfully pursue the twin domains of Yoga and Buddhism, teaching and studying with various teachers. He was a seeker, a bright light with a warm heart. His warmth seemed to emanate from a sweet vulnerability, and perhaps an inner brokenness, that I and most of us did not recognize as a devastating mental illness: manic depression. Perhaps out of concern for his students and family, Michael did not share this painful condition that ironically expressed itself both as genius and as vulnerability. It is our loss.

Fortunately, his teachings persist in his books and online and in the hearts of those who drew inspiration from him. In his too short life, Michael Shō Ken gave of himself generously and his teachings will endure. His spirit of wisdom, responsibility, and joy in life will persist. And we will miss him.

Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara

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I began practicing yoga during an extraordinarily difficult phase of my life, and I thank the many teachers and guides, in both presence and written word, for showing me the possibility and example of a life well lived. The path of yoga comes alive for me in the context of family life. My wife and children are my heart-teachers.

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Glossary of Sanskrit Terms

abhiniveśa Self-preservation; instinctive clinging to life and the fear that one may be cut off from all by death; will to live; strong desire; fear of letting go of the stories of "I, me, and mine."

abhyāsa Practice; action; method; continuous endeavor; repetition; exercise; exertion. From the verb root "as," meaning *to throw*, plus "abhi," meaning *toward*.

advaita Nondualism; nonduality. Literally "not two," from "a," meaning *not*, plus "dvaita," meaning *dual* or *two*.

Agni Fire. A Vedic god.

ahaṇkāra The concept of individuality, from the verb root "kṛ," meaning *action*, plus "aham," meaning *I*); ego or egoism; literally "the I-maker," the state that ascertains "I know"; the sense that identification is occurring.

ahiṁsā Not harming; non-injury; nonviolence. From the verb root "hiṁs," meaning *to injure*, plus the prefix "a," meaning *not*. The word has not merely the negative and restrictive meaning of "nonkilling" or "nonviolence," but the positive and comprehensive meaning of "love embracing all creation."

ānanda Bliss; joy; delight; a type of samādhi. From the verb root "nand," meaning *to rejoice*.

ānandamaya kośa The sheath (kośa) of joy or bliss (ānanda) enveloping the ātman; the felt sense of everything being OK.

anātman With substance; non-self. From "an," meaning *not*, plus "ātman," meaning *self*.

annamaya kośa The sheath of food.

apāna "Carrying-downwards breath"; inspired breath; outbreath; exhalation; digestive energy. From the root "an," meaning *to breathe*, plus "apa," meaning *away*. The downward, contracting, rooting movement characteristic of exhaling. It is based at the center of the perineum, the Mūladhāra chakra. Apāna is said to tether prāṇa. The inner experience of Hatha Yoga begins by consciously uniting prāṇa with apāna, to feel their actions within each other.

aparigraha Nonpossession, nongrasping; nondesiring; not greedy; not being acquisitive; freedom from hoarding or collecting.

āsana Posture; seat; to "sit with."

asmitā The sense of "I," egoism; the state of concentration; an impurity.

Aṣṭān?ga Literally, "eight limbs." Refers to a yoga practice that leads to deep, spontaneous meditation and complete liberation. The variety of limbs guarantees that the awareness operates in all spheres of one's life, so that no distortion, perversion, or fantasy will attempt to usurp the solid ground of real yogic insight. In many of the Yoga Upaniṣads the eight limbs are further expanded into fifteen. The advantage

of considering the path of yoga to have many aspects is that one is encouraged not to neglect the moral, the ethical, the interpersonal, the physiological, the esoteric, and the meditative aspects of practice. The term *Aṣṭān?ga* implies both a simultaneous realization of all these interrelated aspects of practice and a logical step-by-step progression in which one limb prepares one to truly practice the next one.

asteya Not stealing.

atha The present moment, a term used to express a beginning; doubt; interrogation; condition; "after, then, now."

ātman The inner self. "Ātma" means *breath*, from the verb root "at," meaning *to breathe*, or "āp," meaning *to pervade* or *reach up to*.

avidyā Not seeing things as they are; lack of wisdom, ignorance of one's true nature; from the root verb "vid," meaning *to know*, plus the prefix "a," meaning *not*.

bandha Bond; valve; control; determination. From the verb root "bandh," meaning *to bind*.

bhakti Loving devotion. From the verb root "bhajj," meaning *to love*, *worship*, *revere*.

bhujan?ga Cobra.

bhūta Element; gross elemental principle. From the verb root "bhū," meaning *to become* or *to exist*.

Brahma The creator of the universe; one of the Indian trinity comprising Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Rudra.

brahmacharya Wise use of sexual energy; a code of conduct; dwelling in Brahman; a student; "the path that leads to Brahman" or "moving in Brahman"; a life of celibacy, religious study and self-restraint; impeccable conduct.

buddhi Intellect; the discriminative faculty; perception. From the verb root "budh," meaning *to enlighten*, *to know*.

buddhindriyas Sense capacities, i.e., hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting and smelling.

chakra Wheel or circle; center; disc; plexus; centers in the body; energy center. From the verb root "car," meaning *to move*.

citta Consciousness; where name and form meet. From the verb root "cit," meaning *to perceive*, *to observe*, *to think*, *to be aware*, or *to know*.

dhāraṇa Meditation; support; single-mindedness; "holding bearing"; to keep in remembrance.

dhyāna Concentration.

duḥkha Unsatisfaction; lack; distress; suffering; sorrow; that which is unsatisfactory (because it is impermanent). From "dur," meaning *bad*, plus "kha," meaning *state*.

dveṣa Antipathy; hatred; aversion. From the verb root "dviś," meaning *to hate*.

garuḍa Eagle; Viṣṇu's vehicle; "devourer."

granthi Knot. From the root "granth," meaning *to string together*.

guna Quality; attribute; characteristic; excellence; rope; constituent; subsidiary; mode; fundamental quality of nature.

guru Teacher; preceptor; great; mentor; heavy; weighty; venerable. From the verb root "gṛ," meaning *to invoke* or *to praise*.

hālāhala Poisonous herb; metaphor for saṁsāra.

iḍā nadi The psychic nerve or tube on the right side of the spine; a nadi or channel of energy starting from the left nostril, then moving under the crown of the head and thence descending to the root of the spine.

In its course it conveys lunar energy and is therefore called Chandra nadi (channel of lunar energy).

Indra Ruler; chief (of the gods in the Vedic pantheon); mighty; powerful.

īśvara-praṇidhānā Devotion to a god; divine ideal of pure awareness (īśvara); surrender; dedication (praṇidhānā).

jīva Individual soul; life; embodied self; living entity. From the verb root "jīv," meaning *to live*.

jñāna Knowledge; wisdom; insight; comprehension. From the verb root "jñā," meaning *to know*.

kaivalya The distinct difference between puruṣa, meaning pure awareness, and prakṛti, meaning all changing phenomena; emancipation; isolation of pure awareness.

kāma Desire; pleasure; lust; love. From the verb root "kām," meaning *to desire*.

kapota Dove or pigeon.

karma Volitional action and result; creativity; rite; deed; cause and effect; accumulation of past actions; physical, verbal, or mental action. From the verb root "kṛ," meaning *to act*, *to do*, or *to make*.

karmedriyas Action capacities, i.e., speaking, holding, walking, excreting, and procreating.

karuṇa Compassion.

kleṣa Cause of suffering; corruption; hindrance; affliction; poison; passion; defiling element. From the verb root "kliś," meaning *to torment* or *distress*.

kośa Sheath; cover; subtle body; treasury; lexicon. From the verb root "kuś," meaning *to enfold*.

krodha Anger; wrathful; furious. From the verb root "krudh," meaning *to be angry*.

kuṇḍalinī Serpent; life force; a type of yoga; coiled; winding; spiraled; "coiled one." From the verb root "kuṇḍ," meaning *to burn*. The burning up of knots and holding patterns in mind and body, the most significant of which is the clinging to self-image.

lobha Greed; covetousness.

mada Pride; conceit; intoxication; exhilaration; dementia.

mahābhūta The five gross material elements, i.e., space, wind, fire, water, air, and earth.

maṇḍala Circle; magic circle; the special domain of any particular divinity; energy cycle; a section of the Ṛg Veda.

manomaya kośa One of the sheaths (kośa) covering the ātman; the sheath of the mind; affects the functions of awareness, feeling, and motivation not derived from subjective experience.

mārga Way; path; street. From the verb root "mārg," meaning *to seek*, *to strive*.

mātsarya Envy; jealousy.

maya The principle of appearance; illusion; marvelous power of creation; magical power; mystery; "that which measures." From the verb root "mā," meaning *to measure*, *to limit*, *to give form*.

moha Infatuation; delusion. From the verb root "muh," meaning *to delude*.

mokṣa Liberation; spiritual freedom; release; final emancipation of the ātman from recurring births. From the verb root "mokṣ," meaning *to liberate*.

mṛtyu Death; to grind down.

mūla bandha Mūla root. Primary, original, text; the natural and spontaneous contraction of the perineal muscles and the drawing of the attention to its center point just in front of the anus and behind the genitals. It is essentially a meditative awakening to what it feels like to be at the root of the body (the

mūla), done in conjunction with the breath.

nadi River; nerve; vessel; ducts for vital air ("prāṇa"); conduit; energy channel; vein; artery.

nama Name.

neti, neti Not this not this (not such, not such). From "na," meaning *not*, plus "iti," meaning *thus*.

nirodha Stilling; negation; cessation; restriction. From the root verb "rudh," meaning *to obstruct*, *arrest*, *avert*, plus "ni," meaning *down* or *into*.

nirvāna Extinction; perfection; the Great Peace; literally "blowing out," from the verb root "vā," meaning *to blow*, plus "nir," meaning *out*.

niyamas Internal discipline.

padmāsana Lotus posture.

paramātman The supreme self; Brahman; God; the Absolute; the selfless self of awareness. From "parama," meaning *highest*, plus "ātman," meaning *self*.

pariṇāma Change; modification; transformation; evolution; development; ripening; changing; the ever-constant change and transformation of the substratum of material existence.

pin?galā A nadi or channel of energy, starting from the right nostril, then moving to the crown of the head and thence downward to the base of the spine. As the solar energy flows through it, it is also call sūrya nadi (Sun channel). "Pin?galā" means *tawny* or *reddish*.

prajāpati Lord of creatures; creator; lord of becoming. From "prajā," meaning *creation*, plus "pati," meaning *lord*.

prajña Wisdom; intuitive wisdom; gnosis.

prakṛti Primal nature; primordial nature; phenomenal world; creatrix. From the verb root "kṛ," meaning *to make* or *to do*, plus "pra," meaning *forth*.

prāṇa Vital air; life breath; vitality; the upward, expanding, blossoming movement characteristic of inhaling. From the verb root "an," meaning *to breathe*, plus "pra," meaning *forth*. It is said to be centered in the Anāhata Chakra (heart center); Apān is said to tether prāṇa. Yoga begins by consciously uniting prāṇa with apāna, to feel their actions within each other.

prāṇa vāyuu A breath cycle with attention to the internal pattern of inhaling.

prāṇamaya kośa The sheath of vital air; the physiological (prāṇamaya) sheath (kośa), which along with the psychological (manomaya) and intellectual (vijn?ānamaya) sheaths, make up the subtle body (sūkṣma srira enveloping the ātman. The prāṇamaya kośa includes the respiratory, circulatory, digestive, endocrine, excretory and genital systems.

prāṇāyāma Control of breath; breath regulation; restraint of the breath.

pratyāhāra The natural uncoupling of sense organs and sense objects during concentration; withdrawal of the senses from their objects; beyond the mind.

pṛthvī The earth.

purāṇa Ancient; old; folk tales or Indian teachings. From the verb root "pur," meaning *to go before* or *to precede*.

puruṣa Pure awareness; cosmic person.

raga Wanting; desire; passion; attachment. A breath cycle with attention to the internal pattern of inhaling. Control of breath; breath regulation; restraint of the breath. The natural uncoupling of sense organs and

sense objects during concentration; withdrawal of the senses from their objects; beyond the mind.

rāja Royal; king. From the verb root "rāj," meaning *to reign*, or *illuminate*.

rodha To hold or keep a check on something; the goddess of storms.

sahasrāra The thousand-petaled; the seventh subtle center.

Śākti Power; capacity; energy; potency; "citi" or "kuṇḍalinī"; force, the divine cosmic energy which projects, maintains, and dissolves the universe; the spouse of Śiva (from "śak," meaning *to be able*); female energy.

samādhi One-pointedness; oneness; concentration; integration; absorption; union; a calm, desireless fixity; unifying concentration; "equal mind." From the verb root "dhā," meaning *to hold*, plus the prefixes "ā" and "sam," meaning *together completely*.

saṁsāra Empirical existence; the wheel of birth and death; transmigration; the flux of the world; the flow of the world; the objective universe; this world; worldly illusion. From the verb root "sṛ," meaning *to flow*, plus "sam," meaning *together*.

saṁskāra Psychophysical grooves; latent impression; predisposition; consecration; imprint; innate tendency; innate potence; mold; inborn nature; residual impression; purificatory rite; rite of passage. From "sam," plus "kṛ," meaning *to fashion* or *to do together*.

samstitihi Equal standing.

saṁyoga Conjunction; contact; coupling; union; association; mingling.

santoṣa Contentment; peace.

śāstra Scripture; teaching; doctrine; treatise. From the verb root "śā s," meaning *to rule* or *to teach*.

satya Honesty; truthfulness; truth. From the verb root "as," meaning *to be*.

śauca Purity; cleanliness.

savāsanā Corpse pose.

Śiva Auspicious; the Ultimate Reality; Lord; male energy.

skandha Group; aggregate.

smṛti Memory; recollection; depth memory; "that which is remembered"; immediate attention; mindfulness with the following attributes in mature practice: present-centered, nonconceptual, nonjudgmental, intentional, engaged through nonattachment, nonverbal, exploratory, liberating, steady, and at ease. From the verb root "smṛ," meaning *to remember*.

śūnya Boundlessness; empty; zero. From the verb root "śū" or "śva" or śvi," meaning *to swell*.

śūnyatā nsubstantiality; emptiness.

suṣumnā nadi The subtle central nerve; the principal nerve; the main channel of energy situated in the spinal column.

sutra Aphorism; thread; condensed mnemonic verse. From the verb root "siv," meaning *to sew*.

svādhyāya Self-study; education of the self; reflection. From "sva," meaning *self*, plus the verb root "adhi-i," meaning *to go over*.

svarūpa Natural form; actual or essential nature; essence; own form, identity. From "sva," meaning *own* or *self*, plus "rūpa," meaning *form*, *shape*, or *figure*.

tanmātra The subtle essence of the fire elements; the pure elements; the subtle elements, namely, the essence of sound (śabda), touch (sparśa), form (rūpa), flavor (rasa) and odor (gandha). They are subtle

objects of the sense powers (indriyas), namely, the powers of hearing (śrota), feeling (tvak), seeing (chaksu), tasting (rasanā) and smelling (ghrāna).

tantra Rule; ritual; scripture; religious treatise; loom; warp. From the root "tan," meaning *to do in detail*, plus "trā," meaning *to protect*.

tapas Heat; intensity of discipline; concentrated discipline; austerity; penance; energy; to heat up. From the verb root "tap," meaning *to burn*.

vairāgya Dispassion; detachment; renunciation; nonattachment; absence of worldly desires.

vajra Thunderbolt; diamond.

vāsanā Latent tendency; impression; conditioning; self-limitation; predisposition; desires. Also called saṁskāra.

vāyuu Air; life breath; the wind; the vital airs.

vidyā Knowledge; meditation; wisdom; insight.

Vijñanamaya kośa The sheath of intelligence, affecting the process of reasoning and judgment derived from subjective experience.

vinyasa A sequence, connoting a step-by-step progression from one stage to another. This is how all things evolve in natural systems. Like a sprout bursting up and sinking roots in complete symbiosis with time, temperature, soil, air, and light, so yoga postures and meditative insights are part of a singular system that works from within the space of pure intelligence.

vipāka Effect of an action; a type of transformation; ripening, resultant; fruition.

virāsana Hero's pose.

Viṣṇu The supreme Lord; the all-pervading; the spirit of time.

viveka Discrimination.

vṛtti Mental mode; a modification of the mind whose function is to manifest objects; being; condition; fluctuation; activity; patternings, turnings, movements. From the verb root "vṛt," meaning *to turn*, *revolve*, *roll*, *move*.

yama Abstention; self-control; restraint; external discipline. From "yam," meaning *to restrain*.

yuj To unite; join; connect.

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