

## Spring 2017, Part 1: The 5 principles of yoga

This term we are going to centre our practice around the following themes as defined by Swami Vishnudevananda:

1. Appropriate physical exercise
2. Appropriate breathing
3. Appropriate relaxation
4. Proper diet
5. Positive thinking and meditation

### ASANAS (1): postures

2.46: The physical postures should be steady and comfortable.

2.47: They are mastered when all effort is relaxed and the mind is absorbed in the Infinite.

2.48: Then we are no longer upset by the play of opposites ... (between body and mind).

(Patanjali: The Yoga Sutras)

Postures and our ability to perform them is affected by our body shape (individual skeletal structure), our flexibility and our strength (ligaments and muscles). With regular exercise and appropriate posture alignment, we can improve our flexibility, our strength (stira and stukha) and also correct skeletal unbalances. Our bones affect our structure; muscles and ligaments affect our movements.

#### Five factors can influence our muscular efficiency:

1. Stretching: it is essential to warm-up muscles with initial stretches to maximise the potential tension of the muscles. Pawanmuktasana (Joint Free Series) or Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) are good examples of warm-ups.

2. Temperature: a warm muscle works more efficiently than a cold muscle: the activity of enzymes is facilitated and the added amount of oxygen distributed to the muscular fibres. This improves the elasticity of the muscles by increasing the strength and the speed of contraction. It increases the whole body temperature and is better controlled than if you artificially increase the surrounding temperature as in Hot Yoga sessions.

3. Viscosity: blood viscosity decreases with a warm-up and blood circulation improves.

4. Speed of performance: if movements are done at a slow or moderate speed, less energy is wasted to overcome the frictions between muscular fibres.

5. Fatigue: tired muscles are inefficient and weak. It is important to relax between exercises and asanas to let the muscles recover.

When we over-work our muscles they produce lactic acid, which may induce cramps. Over-working your muscles can also lead to aches and pains, which are the result of micro-trauma. Listen to your body and know your limits.

Om Shanti

Marianne Reverse-Hayes, January 2017  
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## Appropriate breathing: pranayama, (2)

49. Next comes the breathing exercises, which suspend the flow of the breath and increase the life energy

50. The life energy is increased by regulation of the out-breath, the in-breath, or the breath in mid-flow. Depending upon the volume, and the length of the holding, the breathing becomes slow and refined.

52. Then the light of the intellect is unveiled

53. And the mind is prepared for steadiness

**(Patanjali, Yoga Sutra, chapter2)**

We take it for granted that we are breathing. For yogis, breathing appropriately does not only mean bringing more oxygen into the blood (and therefore to the brain); but also breathing in order to control "Prana", the vital energy, which controls the mind. We have a physical body with bones, muscles, nerves, etc. But we need Prana to make it alive. Prana and mind are intricately linked: fluctuation of one means fluctuation of the other. In the Yoga Pradipika (Chapter 2, verse 2), the mind is equated with a wild monkey, jumping here and there, and it is very difficult to hold it still. To quieten the mind, we need to concentrate on our autonomic body functions like breathing, as the breathing process is directly connected to the brain and central nervous system. Erratic breathing sends erratic impulses to the brain centre and thus creates erratic responses.

The majority of new students of yoga are unaware of the process of breath control. Therefore it is crucial to start focusing on the process of breathing and also on the quality of the breath (slow and refined). Linking breath and movement is a good place to start. We can do it in various positions (lying down, standing, sitting), and by placing our hands on the area we want to focus on.

### There are 3 levels of breathing:

1. Abdominal (deep breathing, diaphragmatic breathing)
2. Thoracic (medium depth breathing)
3. Clavicular (shallow breathing).

Most people tend to breathe at level 2 and 3. This type of breathing is quite shallow and is linked to stress. After a shock or under emotional distress, the respiration becomes quicker and shallower. Diaphragmatic breathing brings the best and the deepest ventilation to the lungs. Children use it naturally and also adults when they are asleep. Shallower breathing decreases vitality and increases our susceptibility to illnesses.

### Diaphragmatic breathing and yogic breathing

The diaphragm is that muscle situated at the basis of our rib cage. During the inhalation, the diaphragm contracts and goes down, pushing the abdomen out and allowing air into the lungs. During exhalation the diaphragm relaxes and goes up, lets out the air from the lungs and allows the abdomen to go back to its original position. The central diaphragm is linked to secondary diaphragms in the pelvis and the throat: your whole body is engaged in that process.

The yogi breath or Full Lung Breath implies the use of the 3 levels of breathing: abdominal, thoracic and clavicular. It allows the use of the full lung capacity and has a cooling and calming effect on the mind. Inhalation is often considered as the most important part of the process of breathing. In fact it is the exhalation, which gets rid of stale air that is the most important. During pranayama (breathing exercises) the absorption of oxygen is less, but is more effective as carbon dioxide is eliminated more effectively. Retention of the breath, used in more advanced pranayama practices, allows the Prana to be absorbed by the whole body.

## Benefits of appropriate breathing

Yogic breathing practices improve the circulation of the better oxygenated blood. Prolonged exhalation has a tranquillising effect on the nervous system, whereas inhalation and retention have a stimulating effect. Yogic breathing strengthens the respiratory muscles, and the lung capacity is increased. It is beneficial in conditions such as asthma (breathing out against resistance) or bronchitis (effect of suction in the bronchi for expectoration: bellow-type of breathing with forced exhalation). Finally it is useful “off the mat” in daily life to deal with difficult situations, allowing you to take distance and review your relationship to these situations.

However, breathing difficulties are caused by all sort of factors, besides lack of fitness or body weight. With conditions such as anxiety (hyperventilation), anaemia, asthma, bronchitis and emphysema, it is important not to over-exert during asana practice. If anyone experiences dizziness or breathlessness, it is better to cease voluntary breathing and rest. Heart and circulatory problems might also affect the breath upon exertion caused by reduced circulation of blood through the lungs. So with heart and circulatory conditions, it is advisable to do gentle asana and breathing practices, and also avoid to raise arms over the head.

**Marianne Reverse-Hayes, 20/01/2017**

## Appropriate relaxation: Savasana (3)

Yoga is the settling of the mind into silence.  
When the mind has settled,  
We are established in our essential nature,  
Which is unbounded consciousness.  
Our essential nature is usually overshadowed by the activity of the mind.  
(Patanjali, Yoga Sutra, chapter one, verses 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4)

This quotation that opens the Yoga Sutras illustrates perfectly the aim of deep relaxation in Yoga. Relaxation helps to reach our subconscious, or even further the “unconscious state” or “Shoonya”. Shoonya is also called the “zero state” or the “state of meditation on nothing”. At that stage our mind, this wild drunken monkey, becomes tamed and we can reach our “true Self” or “Atman”. “Atman” is sometimes translated as “soul”. It is the part of absolute in us, that we share with all human beings, animals, plants and minerals. Only in a deep state of meditation can we reach that state of wholeness with the Universe, or maybe the Universes with all their unknown dimensions. Now this is the spiritual aspect of relaxation.

Relaxation does not involve drugs and enhance the body’s ability to heal itself and adjust to stress. It helps the body to relieve anxiety, pain, fatigue and their consequence: muscle tension. By slowing down the heartbeat, the respiratory rate, the metabolic rate and lowering the level of arousal generally, hence decreasing the muscle tension, relaxation induces feelings of calm. The whole body can relax and only then can the mind be at peace. The brain, as the physical mediator of consciousness, will power that process. Nervous pathways can be cleared. So when mind, body and emotions rest as a harmonious unit; deep relaxation can begin. In Yoga body and mind are not in opposition; but are just different layers within one unit.

There are various techniques of relaxation taught in various contexts. These methods can be very useful and serve different purposes: physical, psychological as well as spiritual. In yoga, relaxation is a pre-requisite for meditation. It has benefits, which are widely recognised. Breathing exercises, massage or self-massage, release of muscle tension, altered state of consciousness are common aspects of relaxation. Continuous tension can lead to exhaustion and relaxation techniques are

known to reduce fatigue, raise the level of performance and enhance the efficiency of the immune system. Emphasis on exhalation and inhalation used appropriately helps: it is like putting in the right fuel for the appropriate engine.

### **Examples of relaxation techniques**

1. Tense and release relaxation: easy practice to do by yourself. The tensing and releasing have to be done in full awareness, with breath awareness.
2. Breathing techniques: Full Yogi Breath, Spinal breath, Navel centre with spinal breath, Ascending breathing (count is increased: for example from 3 to 4, etc.).
3. Yoga Nidra: it means “yogic sleep”. The aim is to lead to a state of supra-consciousness by withdrawing the senses and reaching that state of “silence of the mind”, which is at the edge of sleep. We are still awake and attentive to our deeper Self. It is a progressive and slow process.

**Marianne Reverse-Hayes, 27/01/2017**

## **Appropriate/healthy diet (4)**

In her book “Gut”, Julia Enders tells us that we have a second brain situated in our guts. What happens in our guts mirrors our emotional states: “I did not have the guts”, “I feel it in my guts”, “I feel gutted”. Our popular expressions demonstrate this. Indeed, in our guts, there is a whole universe of bacteria that controls our body, and subsequently our mind. Their correct working depends a lot on what we ingest, food of course; but also what we breathe. Not only what we breathe is important (levels of pollution); but also how we breathe (see part 2). In the same way, not only we are what we eat; but also how we eat.

In the “Hatha yoga pradipika” we are told:

One who is Brahmachari, takes moderate and pure food, is regular and intent on yoga and renounces attachment to sensual experience, becomes perfect (siddha) after a year.(1.57)

We are also advised to take sweet food, which does not mean food with extra sugar. It means food that is fresh and pleasant:

Food which is disagreeable means that it is either bad tasting, poisonous to the system or not agreeable to one’s metabolism. The most conducive foods for yogi are good grains, wheat, rice, barley, ghee, brown sugar, crystallised sugar, honey, dry ginger, patola fruit (species of cucumbers), five vegetables, mung and such pulse, pure water (1.62)

That is not an extensive list. Amongst other things, oil, mustard, flesh foods, curds, alcohol are not recommended. Mainly anything that is highly concentrated, causes acidity in the stomach and overheats the whole system should be avoided: food that create toxins and putrefy in the intestines, meat being one of them. We are also advised to avoid alcohol not only because it intoxicates the mind; but also because it destroys liver and brain cells that do not reproduce themselves.

We are also told to eat “to please Shiva” meaning that we should cultivate the attitude that we are nourishing the body for its maintenance, so our consciousness can continue its progress of unfoldment and spiritual evolution:

The stomach should not be overloaded: it should be half-full with food, one quarter-full with water and one quarter-full with air.

The food should also be “sattvic” meaning not reheated, light and easy to digest. Yoga is closely linked to another branch of Indian philosophy, Ayurveda: ayur means life, veda means knowledge. Ayurveda is a branch of medicine, that looks closely at the way we eat. In Ayurveda there are 3 basic constitutions, the 3 doshas (Pitta, Vata and Kapha) linked to elements (water, earth, fire, air and space/ether). Depending on your constitution, you are advised on different tastes (rasa) in

your diet, such as sweet or salty etc. to help you to keep healthy. So if you react to certain food, it is because of your constitution. It is not the chocolate cake that does not agree with you, it is YOU who do not agree with the chocolate cake. I am going to organise a workshop in the summer on Ayurveda. So if you are interested, let me know.

We also have to discriminate between pleasure and joy. Eating for pleasure can lead to overeating and diseases. Eating for joy means that we eat and sustain ourselves to enjoy life, fulfil our “dharma” or our potential in life, and live in harmony with the universe in full consciousness. Pleasure is only a sense experience, and is transitory and limited. Joy is being in harmony with the creative forces of the universe. It is our destiny and it is permanent. That is why we are doing Yoga.

Yogic food is vegetarian. There are health arguments. For example, the use of antibiotics in animal food can lead to a resistance to them in humans. A vegetarian diet contributes to lower cholesterol levels and also uric acid levels responsible for gout. Furthermore, a part from the non-violence argument (ahimsa), there are also environmental reasons and macro-economic reasons to support a vegetarian diet. For example, amongst other arguments, it was estimated that you need 4 to 10 times more ground to produce five-hundred grams of beef proteins than what is needed to produce the same quantity of vegetal proteins. So you could say that with a growing population, a vegetarian diet is a better option for a sustainable diet. There are also arguments against it. A vegetarian diet lacks vitamins D and B12. Where you can compensate the lack of proteins by introducing a little bit of milk products in your diet and try to grasp as much as you can of sunlight for vitamin D, you can only find vitamin B12 in meat. Also if your diet has been heavily meat-based so far, you have to get your body to adapt to a vegetarian diet progressively; so your digestive system gets accustomed to it.

## Positive thinking and meditation (5)

If you have tried using positive affirmations, you know that it can be a difficult habit to maintain. The problem with positive affirmations is that they operate at the surface level of conscious thinking and do nothing to contend with the subconscious mind where limiting beliefs really live. You can try to tell yourself: “I am successful”, but if you struggle with insecurity regarding your skills and accomplishments, your subconscious may likely to remind you of the many times you have embarrassed yourself or made a mistake. It is natural and healthy to experience a range of feelings, including disappointment, sadness or guilt. However, ruminating in negative emotions can turn toxic. On the other hand, whilst repeating positive self-statements may benefit people with high self-regards, it can backfire for those lacking confidence. Unreasonably optimistic thinking can trigger a self-defeating spiral, particularly for those prone to anxiety and depression. So positive thinking is not about starting the day with repeating your positive affirmation for 10 minutes, and then spend the next 23 hours and 50 minutes struggling with it. It is about training the mind and using strategies:

1. Acknowledge your negative emotions, observe them, and let them go. Contemplate the other side of the coin.
2. Chase and focus on the good things, however small.
3. Allow yourself to experience humour, even in the most trying situations.
4. Accept that you are not perfect: turn your failures into lessons.
5. Transform negative self-talk into positive ones.
6. Focus on the present: let the memories be in the past where they belong; the future has not unfolded itself yet; so why should you start imagining things, and worry about it? Stay in the present moment.

7. Surround yourself with positive people. It is not about excluding “negative” people from your life, it is more about using your power of discrimination (viveka) and being able to judge what is good for you.

### **Patanjali: the Yoga sutras)**

1.33 The mind becomes clear and serene when the qualities of the heart are cultivated:

Friendliness towards the joyful,  
Compassion towards the suffering,  
Happiness towards the pure,  
and impartiality towards the impure

1.34 .. Or through the practice of various breathing exercises

Viveka is the ability to discriminate between what is permanent (real) and what is impermanent (unreal). However, to be able to acquire this ability, you need to quieten the mind. Meditation (Dyana) is a mean to that end. Why should you control your mind?

You may often feel harassed by all sort of things. By controlling the waves of your thoughts, by observing them for what they are: waves that will crash and be replaced with new waves; you can reach your true Self or real nature and see the “bigger picture”. You are then in the present moment, only aware of that reality: “I AM” in the eternity of NOW: past and future become irrelevant. There are various techniques to reach that state: breathing techniques, focus on an object, guided meditation...

Yoga Nidra or yogic sleep combine meditation and positive thinking (Sankalpa). A Sankalpa is a positive affirmation that YOU choose through meditative techniques. Yoga Nidra then takes you to the edge of sleep and enables you to bring that affirmation to your subconscious. If you then repeat it consciously, you are sending positive messages at a deeper level to your subconscious. It is like planting a seed during the Yoga Nidra, and then watering it and allowing it to blossom.