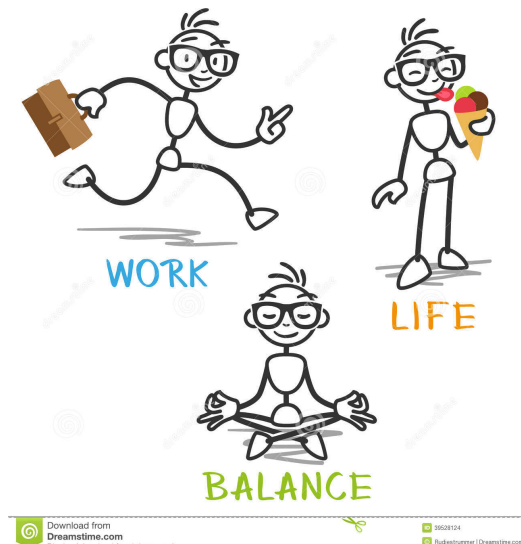


Yoga is not just about being flexible or strong. Fitness is not the ultimate aim of a yoga practice. It is only a tool to go further on the path of controlling your life and find fulfilment generally. In yogic term, that would be achieving our *dharma*, our purpose in this life and beyond.



A way to control our life is to be aware, to be able to stop procrastinating because of what happened in the the past, or constantly projecting ourselves into the future. Balances and inversions request concentration and focus: when you are busy keeping your balance in Tree (Vrksasana), warrior 3 (virabhadrasana 3) or Head stand (Salamba Sirsasana) you tend to forget about your issues. This is mindfulness.

Mindfulness means doing one thing at a time and put our full attention into what we are doing. Our inner focus is in charge; distractions stay on the periphery of the mind, so our immediate experience is fully realised. In our practice, mindfulness begins by feeling the posture come to life, sensing the response of the breath, being mindful of stretch, strength, and balance as well as our boundaries.

This is where the concept of *Svadyaya* or self-study comes into play. When we practice a posture we need to be aware of how to get into the posture and to get out of it, as well as what our limits are. The attention to internal-body adjustments during each pose brings one-pointed awareness to the muscles, joints and organs. But they also turn the mind's focus to the present moment. When we consciously drop the shoulders, the mind becomes present. When the mind wanders, the shoulders rise. These adjustments tell the mind: " Be here, nowhere else."

In a previous session I mentioned *Sthira* and *sukha*, steady but soft qualities that allow us to come into a posture “pacified” and able “to contemplate the infinite”. This means never to go BEYOND our edge, and accept our limits with detachment and peace of mind. *Svadyaya* can be understood with the image of the ocean and its waves. As a wave (individual being), we all are “unique” by our location in space, as well as by other qualities, such as shape, size and colour. So we are all different and therefore achieve things in different ways; one way not being “better” than the other. But the substance of every wave remains the sea itself. And since individual waves are part of the sea, as they appear and disappear, they neither increase nor decrease the immensity of water. So as individual being (a wave), we belong to the whole of the universe (the ocean), and when we practise postures in a mindful way, we can become aware of this belonging and “*contemplate the infinite*”.

Balances effectively balance the nervous system, develops control over the body and improves mental concentration. Body’s movements become more graceful and free, with less effort and less inefficient movements. It helps to remove anxiety and balance the emotions; generally it helps us to develop a sense of balance in your life.

Inverted poses such as Headstand, Handstand, Elbow Stand (dolphin), Downward dog, Viparita Karani, Shoulderstand have a dramatic effect on the flow of blood to every organ of the body. Turning the body upside down tricks the body into believing that blood pressure has risen, so the body takes immediate steps to lower blood pressure, including a relaxation of blood vessels and reduction in the hormones that cause retention of water and salt. These physiological adjustments may help ease menopausal symptoms for example. If supporting ourselves upside down seems daunting, we can practise with the support of a wall and/or a chair. Generally, inverted postures reverse the effect of gravity on the body, reduce anxiety and stress, improve concentration and self-confidence. However, it is advisable to get into the posture in steps and not stay in these postures for too long (over one minute). If it feels too strenuous we can go for alternative variations, especially if there is a back/neck problems or High Blood pressure.