

YOGA

WAY AND ART OF LIVING

An Intelligent Body

"To live totally in the body is to live totally in the self." (1)

What strikes one from the outset in the Yoga of B.K.S. Iyengar is the emphasis he places on the asana (postures). Today, at the age of over eighty, he still enjoys giving demonstrations, on his own or with his pupils. When he lectures, he immediately illustrates what he says with the appropriate posture. In and through his body he lives yoga as an art, and plays, as Yehudi Menuhin once observed, with his entire being, "with no instrument."

For him, as for the sages of ancient times, the body is not merely the envelope of flesh that we can see and touch. What we would normally consider to be the "body" is only the visible, tangible part known according to Indian thought as the "field of consciousness" (*citta- 2*). Yoga considers that the totality of the human "vehicle" is composed of three bodies (*sharira*) in which five sheaths (*kosha*) are interwoven.

*"The body comprises three tiers, which are themselves composed of several sheaths. The gross body, called the *sthula sharira*, corresponds to the physical or anatomical sheath (*annamaya-kosha-3*). The subtle body, or *sukshma sharira*, is made up of the physiological sheath (*pranamaya kosha - 4*), the mental sheath (*manomaya- kosha - 5*) and the intellectual sheath (*vijñanamaya- kosha - 6*). The innermost body, on which all the others depend, is known as the causal body, or *karana sharira*. This is the spiritual sheath of joy (*anandamaya- kosha - 7*). When all these sheaths come together in each and every one of our trillions of cells - when there is oneness from the cell to the self, from the physical body to the core of the being - then the pose is a contemplative pose and we have reached the highest state of contemplation in the asana.*

*That is known as integration (8), which Patañjali describes in the third chapter of the Yoga Sutra, and which involves integration of the body (*sharira-samyama*), integration of the breath (*prana-samyama*), integration of the senses (*indriya-samyama*), integration of the mind (*manah-samyama*), integration of the intelligence or of knowledge (*buddhi-samyama* or *jñana-samyama*) and, finally, integration of the self with all existence (*atma-samyama*)." (Tree of Yoga p48/49)*

Although postural practice aims essentially at developing firmness and suppleness in the body in order to maintain a state of perfect health, it is not limited merely to physical practice. Whilst it is the foundation of any

work, the physical body is also the point of contact with our internal universe. *"The skin encloses all the sheaths and bodies. It should be firm and sensitive to the slightest movement. All sheaths are intermingled on their different levels from the skin to the Self."* (*Light on Pranayama*)

Physical alignment is at the centre of postural practice. There is "asana" only if a correct alignment of the body can be created through the symmetry of the stretch, in such a way as to maintain both the direction of the pose and the centre of gravity in perfect equilibrium. In order to achieve this, everything in the body must be brought to life. *"In postures intelligence should be uniform."*

" *"Allow your intelligence to penetrate evenly throughout the body to its extremities, like the rays of the sun."* Perception of our own sensations must be refined and extended to the entire body (joints, muscles, ligaments, bones, skin, internal organs...) for it is through this perception that signs of the spread of intelligence, the only trustworthy guide for the student of yoga (other than her/his teachers corrections) will appear and develop. "Stretch" means "creating space", opening a pathway to consciousness and movement where it sometimes seems that there is no way through. By creating opposition between two anchor points, two forces pulling in opposite directions, free space is born between the two, at the middle point. This process is activated in the different segments of the body simultaneously.

The *asana* is then constructed on the alignment of these key points which are maintained under control and built up from the contact of the foot with the ground upwards (from the sole of the foot to the bridge, from the bridge to the ankle, from ankle to knee, from knee to hip etc.) along every axis of the body (feet, legs, hips, chest, shoulders, arms, neck, head). The relationship between all these points must be balanced if the alignment is to be true and constant, if, in other words, the posture is to be harmonious and stable. *"To bring a part of the body in correct alignment, you have to work with the whole body. To bring the whole body in correct alignment, you have to work each and every part of the body. When performing asanas, no part of the body should be kept idle (...) Your whole being should be symmetrical. (...) Yoga is symmetry."*

The posture can then evolve, at the pace of the internal state and of awareness level of the practicant. S/he will be able, by developing his/her attention capacity, to identify the inert or incorrect areas so as to adjust them whenever necessary. *"Self-correction comes with perception."*

Each posture induces physiological modifications which will affect the brain, the central nervous system and, therefore, ones emotional and mental state in a specific way. The slightest disalignment in the back of the neck, the head and the shoulders is enough to upset the well-being

and calm of the entire body, even when one is completely motionless as in *shavasana* (9), disturbing the mind as well. Similarly, the inner state of a person is reflected in her/his posture : in a state of stress or mental agitation, brain activity is projected towards the front of the face, vision, of which the field is restricted, is also thrown forward, bringing physical awareness with it to the front of the body in an aggressive manner whilst the back remains inert and the feet unstable. When the brain is calm, it rests at the back of the head, and it is from there that vision can open out towards the infinite, in a state of peacefulness, the entire body centred as if leaning on the spinal column, firmly positioned at the back of the legs, the feet stable and open on the ground. A feeling of well-being, security, awareness and openness to the world spreads throughout ones entire being.

In this way the ethical precepts of yoga are naturally integrated into the practice of *asanas* : *"If the brain is quiet but attentive during asanas, your practice is non-violent ."* (10) The mind and the body are not two separate entities, they are interconnected in the tissue of ones being in such a way that it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. *"The body is part of the mind and the mind is part of the body. They are interconnected, interwoven. The eight aspects of yoga are contained in one posture, in one breath."* (11) It is in and through the body that we live, every instant, the wholeness of our being : union is the non-separation, the non-fragmentation of reality, beginning with our own person. The moral attitude of the practicant is expressed in the body through sincerity (*satya*), intensity of effort (*tapas*), harmony and respect for oneself and others (*ahimsa*) etc. If the posture is unstable, if the breathing is forced, if s/he does not do her or his utmost , it is not yoga. *"If your body can do better, and you're not doing it, your practice is not ethical."* *"Yama and Niyama are implicated in every posture, in every breath."* 9

Constant attention and acuity, not only during the practice of *asanas* but at each moment of daily life, are the only guarantees of a coherent attitude. Yoga doesn't stop when the posture is finished. The quest for realisation cannot be pushed aside when one moves on to other occupations. *"A code of behaviour must be followed, whether you are sitting or standing."* As long as the mind is firmly rooted within itself, attentive, open, alert and, at the same time, peaceful, considering nothing and nobody as foreign to itself, the body is likewise established in a truly "spiritual" practice, in all purity and sincerity. *"Why think about liberation at some future time? Liberation is in the little things, here and now."* *Asana* places us at the heart of the Present.

"Finally, when there is a total feeling in the action without any fluctuations in the stretch, then conative action (karmendriya- 12), cognitive action (Jñanendriya - 13), mental action (manas) and reflective action (buddhi) all meet together to form a total awareness from the self to the skin and from the skin to the self. This is spiritual practice in

yoga." (The Tree of Yoga, p48)

Notes – *An Intelligent Body*

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are taken from the Maxims in "Body, the Shrine" and "B.K.S. Iyengar, His Life and Work"

2 *citta*: comprises the three principal orders of human consciousness :

- *manas*, the mental organ, the mind, unifying and organising sensory data and linking this with memory
- *buddhi*, intelligence controlling the mind through its power to discriminate (e.g. reality from unreality)
- *ahamkara*, the act of saying "I", the ego, appropriating experience, substituting itself for the true Subject, the Self.

3 *annamaya-kosha* : sheath of nourishment

4 *pranamaya-kosha* : sheath of respiration and vital energy

5 *manomaya-kosha* : sheath of the mind

6 *vijñanamaya-kosha*: sheath of intelligence or knowledge

7 *anandamaya-kosha* : sheath of joy and beatitude

8 *integration: samyama* : covers the 3 meditative states (*dharana-dhyana-samadhi*) of Asthanga yoga (the 8 limbs of yoga)

9 *shavasana* : "corpse pose" in which one is stretched out motionless on the floor in a state of deep relaxation

10 Non-violence (*ahimsa*) : the first of "Yama" (respect for others and for all other forms of life)

11 Extract from an interview by Christian Pisano*, published in the magazine "Linga" under the title "L'Éveil de l'intelligence". *Christian Pisano is director of the Yoga Iyengar Centre at Nice.

12 *Karmendriya* : conative senses or motor nerves (from "karma", action and "indriya", organs : organs of action)

13 *Jñanendriya* : cognitive senses or sense of perception (from "jñana", knowledge and "indriya", senses : senses of perception).

Free Breath

"As leaves move in the wind, your mind moves with your breath."

"If you understand how to distribute prana, you can bring about the union of the energies of the individual and of the universe."

Prana is much more than breath or inhaled air. It is life itself - life and consciousness -, the vibrant energy which animates every partical of the macrocosmic universe, each cell of the microcosmic universe. Permeating every level of reality, from the grossest to the subtlest, it is the primordial principle from which all beings take root : the Cosmic Being (*Purusha*), the Self (*Atman*). Within the individual, it suffuses the physical body and every level of our field of consciousness (*citta*).

"Prana and consciousness are in constant contact with each other. They are like twin brothers. It is said in yoga texts that as long as the breath is still, prana is still, and hence the mind is still. All types of vibrations and fluctuations come to a standstill when prana and consciousness are quiet, teady and silent."

Knowing this connection between breath and consciousness, the wise yogis of India advocated the practice of pranayama, which is the very

heart of yoga." (The Tree of Yoga p 124)

It is breathing which, by determining the quality and distribution of vital energy in the body, determines our inner state. When this vital energy is perturbed, the mind wanders restlessly, out of its own centre, losing itself within the windings of its own internal fluctuations (sensations, emotions and thoughts following their own course, out of the mind's control) or in the countless external stimuli which move it from all sides and deflect it constantly from its true axis. Whether these disturbances of the consciousness (*citta vritti* -1) come from within or without, the mind becomes dependant on and susceptible to influences, humours and contingencies of all sorts. And until it abides in its own seat, there can be no freedom, fulfilment or lasting happiness. Yoga is traditionally defined as the art of disciplining the mind (2) and pranayama is the core of all yoga techniques, for through pranayama , the practicant acts directly on the respiratory system which controls the mental organ (*manas*).

Ayurvedic (3) medicine condiders that the principal functions of the body are maintained by five "breaths" or vital currents :

- prana : found in the thorax, controls breathing,
- apana : found in lower abdomen, controls excretion and reproduction,
- samana : found in stomach, controls digestion,
- udana : found in the throat, controls food and air absorption and vocal expression,
- vyana : controls circulation throughout the body of vital energy extracted from air and food.

Pranayama (*prana* - breath, *ayama* - extension, regulation, control) which, literally translated signifies "prolongation of the breath", by extending the lenth of breath can extend life itself and improve its quality. It comprises all the whole range of techniques to regulate vital energy by mastering breathing for, when one acts on *prana* (4) by means of breathing techniques, one aims to energise and harmonise the totality of the body's vital functions.

" The purpose of pranayama is to make the respiratory system function at its best. This automatocally improves the circulatory system, without which the process of digestion and elimination would suffer. Toxins would accumulate, diseases spread through the body and ill-health becomes habitual.

The repiratory system is the gateway to purifying the body, mind and intellect. The key to this is pranayama" (Light on Pranayama, p17)

The advantages are not merely physical - good health, vitality and long life - but also psychological and mental - calming of the nerves, emotional stability, an increase in attention span and concentration, a sense of balance and internal strength -.

Ordinary breathing happens automatically and remains, generally speaking, superficial. Pranayamic technique, by guiding the air the length of its pathway through the body in the three movements of yogic breath (5) aims essentially to slow down, lengthen and deepen the breathing so as to increase progressively the respiratory capacity. With this increase in breathing capacity, the circulation will then be intensified, bringing extra oxygen to every cell in the body. The nervous system reaps the benefit and the brain is at peace and ready for meditative states.

" Patañjali also speaks of a fourth method in pranayama (6) . The first method is inhalation; the second is exhalation; the third is inhalation-retention and exhalation-retention; and the fourth method is when effortful effort becomes effortless through conquest of asana. At first, pranayama is deliberate and effortful, but only when it becomes effortless have we achieved mastery. This is kevala-kumbhaka (7) , which means pure or simple kumbhaka - kumbhaka which takes place by itself and has become natural and effortless. In kevala-kumbhaka there is no thinking. There are no internal or external thoughts. In this spiritual pranayama, you cannot think of anything except aloneness.

Pranayama is at the frontier between the material and the spiritual world, and the diaphragm is the meeting point of the physiological and spiritual body. If, when you hold your breath, your mind sinks after some time, that is not kumbhaka. Even by counting "One, two, three, four" you have lost the divinity - you have lost peace. Remember that kumbhaka is not holding breath; it is holding energy. Kumbhaka is realising the very core of the being which is brought towards the body. You don't think externally and you don't think internally. Having controlled the movements which take place inside and outside, you see that in that silence, no thinking takes place. When you don't think at all, where is the mind? It dissolves in the self." (The Tree of Yoga, p 129)

Once the breath becomes totally free, one is liberated from breath. Where there is neither inhalation nor exhalation nor any effort of retention, the breath (*prana*) and the mind (*manas*) get absorbed at the same time. Consciousness internalises and reaches its very core. Duality disappears. Self is revealed to Himself.

As the immobilisation of the breath neutralises the sensory and mental faculties, *Pranayama* opens the gate to the withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*) and concentration (*dharana*).

"Withdrawing the senses, mind and consciousness from contact with external objects, and then drawing them inwards towards the seer, is

pratyahara", Yoga Sutra, II,54.

" Pratyahara is usually translated as withdrawal of the senses. This means drawing the senses from periphery of the skin towards the core of the being, the soul. The moment the mind becomes silent, the self rests in its abode and the mind dissolves." (The Tree of Yoga, p62)

When one ceases to be dependant upon external impressions - from sensitive objects - the mind (*manas*) turns towards the light of intelligence (*buddhi*) to draw from it discernment and to free itself from the imprint of internal impressions linked to memory (*smrti*) and impregnations linked to the past (*vasana*). Thus begins a strange and mysterious voyage inwards to the source of that light (8) : source of all light, the divine spark of the Self.

"This act of going against the current of memory and mind is pratyahara . With the help of intelligence, the senses commence an inner journey and return to their point of origin. This process of weighing one's instincts, thoughts and actions is the practice of renunciation (vairagya). Detachment from the affairs of the world and attachment towards the soul is pratyahara." (The Tree of Yoga, p64)

Notes – Free Breath

1 vritti : wave, movement, fluctuation, conditioning or conduct in the consciousness

2 "Yogah citta vritti nirodhah", Yoga Sutra I,2 : Yoga is the cessation (nirodha) of movements (vritti) in the consciousness (citta) - as the fruit of discipline -

3 Ayurvedic, from " ayurveda", Science of long life : traditional Indian medicine.

4 If this is impossible to affect directly the vital functions or inner breaths it is possible to do so indirectly through prana-vayu (respiration) : the word " pranayama" means both breath control and/or the totality of the vital breaths. Certain yogis, however, exercise direct control over the vital organs (e.g. Krishnamachar over the cardiac muscle etc.)

5 "Pranayama has three movements : prolonged and fine inhalation, exhalation and retention; all regulated with precision according to duration and place " (Yoga-Sutra , II,50).

6 "The fourth type of pranayama transcends the external and internal pro`oyamas and appears effortless and non-deliberate." (Yoga-Sutra , II,51) This fourth type of pranayama corresponds, analogically to the "fourth state" of consciousness (turyavastha) or transcendental state (the three ordinary states of consciousness being wakefulness, dreaming and deep sleep)

7 "Kevala kumbhaka" : pure retention, unmixed with inhalation or exhalation, where the breath is immobilised.

8 Intelligence (buddhi) has no light of its own; it is comparable to the moon : the light it projects on the mind (manas) comes from the Self, the internal sun, the true source of that light.

Total living

"Total living is samadhi."

Integration (samyama) comprises the three transcendent states representing the achievement of *Asthanga yoga* (the 8 limbs of yoga) :

- *dharana* : concentration
- *dhyana* : meditation
- *samadhi* : absorption in the Self.

Through these ultimate levels of realisation, the being, escaping gradually from the grip of psychological conditioning, conscious and unconscious, becomes fused with the source of its own internal light to live at last, the life described in ancient texts as "being-consciousness-beatitude" (*sat-citt-ananda - 1*).

Thanks to this laying to rest of senses, brain and mind obtained by *pranayama* and *pratyahara*, the practicant has entered into direct communion with the intelligence (*buddhi*). S/he will from now on, work to intensify and regulate her/his power of attention so as to restore, little by little, the unity of the field of consciousness (*citta*), habitually disjointed by the experience of duality (2) , for attention is the key to wholeness of consciousness. If one's attention is focused on a single point, excluding all else, the mental flow in its entirety is centred on that point. If one can then maintain this state of concentration, it becomes a state of meditation :

"Fixing the consciousness on one point or region is concentration (dharana)." Yoga Sutra III,1.

"A steady, continuous flow of attention directed towards the same point or region is meditation (dhyana)." Yoga Sutra III,2.

"Dharana means attention or concentration. It is a way of focusing attention on a particular chosen path, region, spot or place within or outside the body. Dharana is control of the fluctuations of consciousness to focus it towards a single point. In dharana one learns gradually to decrease the fluctuations of the mind so that one ultimately eliminates all waves or tides of consciousness and the knower and the known become one. When consciousness maintains this attention without altering or wavering in the intensity of awareness, then dharana becomes dhyana or meditation." The Tree of Yoga p139

" When awareness fades, concentration fades, intelligence fades, and consciousness also fades. But the moment you are attentive, your intelligence is concentrated. This concentration is dharana, and when that intelligence and awareness do not fluctuate but remain constant,

that is meditation. Because there is no interruption in observation, there is no interruption in the flow of intelligence, there is no fading of awareness, so the subject and the object become one. In dharana the subject and object are still separate (3) - that why you have to concentrate to bring back the subject to look into the object. But the moment the object dissolves into the subject and the subject forgets itself, this is samadhi. Then there is no difference between the object and the subject come together, there is no object, there is no subject; there is soul; there is the seed." The Tree of Yoga, p118.

The awakening of intelligence (*buddhi*) evenly spread throughout the body as a whole, from the periphery of consciousness (localised in the brain as the processor of data given by both senses of perception and organs of action) to its roots (in the center of the heart, the abode of the Self) ensures the quality of attention in the practicant, whose sole task is now to maintain it in its intensity and purity at each and every instant of her/his life. If it occurs during yogic practice (postural, pranayamic or meditative) when conditions are conducive to it (isolated, calm) this state of awareness and profound unity may be easily maintained. It is quite another matter in the course of our daily activities :

"You may practise meditation and develop awareness when you are sitting quietly in a park, and it comes quite easily. But when you are busy working, your life gets dominated by thought and it is hard to have total awareness. When you practise asana, pranayama, and pratyahara, you learn to be totally aware - you develop awareness in your whole body while you are engaged in action. Then you can become totally aware in all circumstances. In a park, while you look at a tree, you forget yourself and you are one with the universe. Why can't you learn to be one with the universe of your own world - that is to say, your self and your body? This way of looking at daily life is total awareness, total integration and total meditation." The Tree of Yoga, p145.

The meditative states may be experienced at any moment of our lives, so long as we pursue our internal practise, without any interruption, either at the very heart of the practice of *asanas*, or during any other activity. *" I meditate, not sitting in a corner, but in every moment of my life, in every position I perform, in every asana ."* The Tree of Yoga, p70.

The state of meditation does not require a complete rupture with daily life. Here and now, on our yoga mat, or indeed in any other situation, we can be wholly present, - wholly ourselves, from the periphery of the body to the centre of the soul and anchor ourselves in the state of unity which is the essence of yoga :

"As long as the mind does not wander during the posture, isn't it spiritual practice?" (4)

"When you do Tadasana (5) , if you are attentive from the soles of your feet to your head without fluctuations of intelligence, there is equanimity

of consciousness. In other words, it is absolute awareness. This means that the consciousness is not fragmented, divided. There is no fluctuation. The moment it deviates, you forget yourself. If you introduce the absolute, what happens? Totality is revealed.

If you do asana in totality, the divine is present. You are in a state of divinity.

At that moment, even the search for atman no longer exists. Did you know this? Because the soul is suddenly revealed."

Although yoga is a difficult art, it demands from us only complete sincerity. Self-knowledge begins at the most obvious level, the physical body, reaches the subtlest layers of consciousness thence right to the very core of our being. Such an exploration permits us to push back ceaselessly the boundaries of life and freedom.

"Until the finite is known, how can we touch the infinite?"

Notes – Total Living

1 "sat-citt-ananda" : being-consciousness-beatitude (from sat- : being , citt : consciousness , ananda : joy, beatitude) refers to the state of the sage (siddha) or emancipated being (jivanmukta).

2 duality (dvaita) : the ordinary experience of the division of reality into opposite extremes (dvanvah) - subject and object, mine and yours, body and soul, etc.- in which the consciousness is literally "disintegrated". The spiritual practice of yoga consists essentially of defragmenting the field of consciousness in order to achieve simplicity and unity : "Meditation is integration - to make the disintegrated parts of man become one again. When you say that your body is different from your mind, and your mind is different from your soul, that means you are disintegrating yourselves." (The Tree of Yoga, p 143)

3 To practise fixing his attention on one point (ekagrata), the practiquant traditionally uses as an aid to concentration a point in his body (eg. the point between the eyebrows) or an external object (eg. a sacred symbol either visual- a mandala: a geometric representation of the universe - or aural, a mantra : a formula charged with a special power, like the syllabe "Ôm".

4 Extract from an interview with Christian Pisano, published in the magazine "Linga" entitled "L'éveil de l'intelligence". Christian Pisano is director of Yoga Iyengar Centre in Nice.

5 Tadasana : "The Mountain", the first of the standing poses : feet together, legs stretched from the ground upwards, the back firmly erect, arms stretched alongside the body.