

WHAT IS YOGA?

All people wish to be happy. This seemingly simple desire appears to elude the best-intentioned efforts of even the most intelligent among us. Yet almost everyone has had glimpses of deep peacefulness when they have felt connected both to themselves, to others, and to nature. Curiously, the state of feeling good and whole does not seem to be something we can order up on demand but rather appears to happen spontaneously. In such moments we experience a sense of translucence such that that which we see, feel, sense, hear, or touch no longer feels separate from us but is experienced as a part of our own totality. When our hand resting over the heart of the beloved merges and becomes one with his or her body, when we become the same midnight sky that fills us with awe, we remember, however briefly, our place in the scheme of things. These brief flickers of remembrance imbue our vision with freshness and innocence so that we can see things as they truly are. Because these moments of lucidity are so blissful, we wish that they may become the base state of our lives rather than the brief and oftentimes tenuous experience to which such happiness is usually assigned. These moments of clarity have nothing to do with the caricatures of happiness presented to us through the media or popular culture. These moments have always been there. The beloved's heartbeat and the sky have always been there. These moments are simply awaiting our arrival.

Yoga is a technology for arriving in this present moment. It is a means of waking up from our spiritual amnesia, so that we can remember all that we *already* know. It is a way of remembering our true nature, which is essentially joyful and peaceful. Developed as a pragmatic science by ancient seers centuries ago, yoga is a practice that any person, regardless of age, sex, race, or religious belief, can use to realize her full potential. It is a means of staying in intimate communication with the formative core matrix of yourself and those forces that serve to bind all living beings together. As you establish and sustain this intimate connection, this state of equanimity becomes the core of your experience rather than the rare exception.

Through observing nature and through intense self-observation and inquiry, the ancient yogis were able to codify the conditions that must be present for realizing our intrinsic wholeness. Although such realization can occur spontaneously, more often than not it is the result of a sustained commitment to practice over a lifetime. This is not to imply that yoga is a goal which we strive toward, or that there is some kind of chronological progression toward “self-improvement.” Rather, it is the recognition that each individual can achieve understanding only through his own exploration and discovery, and that all of life is a continual process of refinement which allows us to see more clearly. When we clean the windshield of our car, we suddenly see the road ahead as bright and defined. The road, the image before us, is exactly as it was before we cleaned the window. The trees are the same green, the sky the same vivid blue, and the markers just as defined, only now we see what is there. We start to be able to see the potholes in the road ahead and to avoid them. We start to remember such dangerous roads and steer our way clear to safer routes in the future. In the same way, yoga is not about self-improvement or making ourselves better. It is a process of deconstructing all the barriers we may have erected that prevent us from having an authentic connection with ourselves and with the world. This tenet is an extremely important one because the effort to change and improve ourselves is fraught with the risk of subtle self-aggression that only produces more unhappiness. We cannot strive toward something that we already are.

Nonetheless, there *is* work to be done. And this work is not about following a formula, or strictly adhering to rules, because yoga is not a paint-by-numbers affair. Nor does yoga require blind faith in an outside authority or dogma. Nor is it a religion, although the practice of its central precepts inevitably draws each individual to the direct experience of those truths on which religion rests. Rather, yoga is a way of living and being that makes real happiness possible. Yoga is also a science that incorporates a broad range of practices and techniques that can be tailored and adapted to best suit your personal constitution and personality. We are not asked to believe anything until we have experimented, tested, and found our direct experience to be sound. The great paradox of this “work” is that there is no reward to strive toward, because the practice *is* the reward. In the very moment you focus your attention by coming back into your body, your breath, and your immediate sensate reality, you will experience a deep sense of vibrant stillness. This feeling is

so pleasurable, so joyful and revitalizing that you will be drawn to practice, and, more important, you will begin to be naturally drawn toward lifestyle choices that nourish your well-being. This work is not about forcing yourself to give up anything, because that which is no longer nourishing to you will gradually drop away effortlessly. There is no waiting and no delayed gratification because yoga is both the means and the result, and the seed of all that is possible is present at the very beginning. This experience of stillness is possible in the first ten minutes of your first yoga class. It is possible in this very breath. Sadly, if we approach and practice yoga with the same cultural dictum of striving and effort, force and self-coercion that we may have applied to other aspects of our lives, we may practice diligently for decades while never allowing our self to appreciate the simple truth of its own wholeness.

Although there are many branches to the tree of yoga, from devotional methods to more intellectual approaches, from schools that emphasize service toward others to those that focus on physical purification, Patanjali, the author of the Yoga Sutras, clearly defines an eight-limbed path (*ashtanga*) that forms the structural framework for whatever emphasis upon which an individual wishes to concentrate. The Yoga Sutras, or “threads,” consist of four books produced sometime in the third century before Christ. Such was the clarity of Patanjali’s vision of wholeness that he consolidated the entirety of yoga philosophy in a series of 196 lucid aphorisms. Each thread of the Yoga Sutras is revealed as a part of a woven fabric, with each aphorism merely a mark or color within the whole pattern. The threads, however, begin to make sense only through a direct experience of their meaning. This is not a linear process but rather an organic one in which colors and markings gradually become more clear until a pattern forms. And this pattern that Patanjali weaves for us is a description of the process of unbinding our limited ideas about ourselves and becoming free.

The eight limbs of yoga are traditionally presented as a hierarchical progression, but this linear progression toward an idealized goal tends only to reinforce the dualistic idea that yoga is something to “get.” It may be more helpful to imagine the eight limbs as the arms and legs of a body—connected to one another through the central body of yoga. Just as a child’s limbs grow in proportion to one another, whatever limb of practice we focus upon inevitably causes the other limbs to grow as well. People who begin yoga through the limb of meditation are often later drawn to practice more physical postures. Those who are drawn to vigorous physical practice later find themselves being drawn into the quieter, more meditative practices. Just as each limb is essential for the optimal functioning of your body, every limb of yoga practice is important. Growth in practice happens naturally when a person is sincere in her wish to grow.

The eight limbs emanating from a central core consist of the following:

Yamas and Niyamas: Ten ethical precepts that allow us to be at peace with ourselves, our family, and our community.

Asanas: Dynamic internal dances in the form of postures. These help to keep the body strong, flexible, and relaxed. Their practice strengthens the nervous system and refines our process of inner perception.

Pranayama: Roughly defined as breathing practices, and more specifically defined as practices that help us to develop constancy in the movement of *prana*, or life force.

Pratyahara: The drawing of one's attention toward silence rather than toward things.

Dharana: Focusing attention and cultivating inner perceptual awareness.

Dhyana: Sustaining awareness under all conditions.

Samadhi: The return of the mind into original silence.

The greater part of this book on yoga will focus on the most down-to-earth practices—the *asanas* and the practices of breathing and meditation. These form an embodied approach to spiritual practice, where we use the body and all our sensual capacities in the service of regeneration and transformation. This is contrasted to many approaches in which the body is seen as an obstacle that must be transcended. Let us first look at the core principles for living, the *yamas* and *niyamas* that form the central vein from which all other yoga practices spring.

THE TEN LIVING PRINCIPLES

The first limb, or the *yamas*, consists of characteristics observed and codified by wise people since the beginning of time as being central to any life lived in freedom. They are mostly concerned with how we use our energy in relationship to others and, in a subtler sense, our relationship to ourselves. The sages recognized that stealing from your neighbor was likely to promote discord, lying to your wife would cause suffering, and violence begets more violence; the results are hardly conducive to living a peaceful life. The second limb, the *niyamas*, constitutes a code for living in a way that fosters the soulfulness of the individual and has to do with the choices we make. The *yamas* and *niyamas* are emphatic descriptions of what we *are* when we are connected to our source. Rather than a list of dos and don'ts, they tell us that our fundamental nature is compassionate, generous, honest, and peaceful.²

In the West we are taught from an early age that what we do and what we own are the sole components for measuring whether we are "successful." We measure our success and that of others through this limited vantage point, judging and dismissing anything that falls outside these narrow parameters. What yoga teaches us is that *who* we are and *how* we are constitute the ultimate proof of a life lived in freedom. If you do not truly believe this, it is likely that you will measure success in

your yoga practice through the achievement of external forms. This tendency has produced a whole subculture of yoga in the West that is nothing more than sophisticated calisthenics, with those who can bend the farthest or do the most extraordinary yoga postures being deemed masters. Because it's easy to measure physical prowess, we may compare ourselves to others who are more flexible, or more "advanced" in their yoga postures, getting trapped in the belief that the forms of the practice *are* the goal. These outward feats do not necessarily constitute any evidence of a balanced practice or a balanced life. What these first central precepts the *yamas* and *niyamas* ask us to remember is that the techniques and forms are not goals in themselves but vehicles for getting to the essence of who we are.

One of our greatest challenges as Westerners practicing yoga is to learn to perceive progress through "invisible" signs, signs that are quite often unacknowledged by the culture at large. Are we moving toward greater kindness, patience, or tolerance toward others? Are we able to remain calm and centered even when others around us become agitated and angry? How we speak, how we treat others, and how we live are more subjective qualities and attributes we need to learn to recognize in ourselves as a testament to our own progress and as gauges of authenticity in our potential teachers. When we remain committed to our most deeply held values we can begin to discern the difference between the *appearance* of achievement and the *true experience* of transformation, and thereby free ourselves to pursue those things of real value.

As you read through the precepts that follow, take the time to dwell upon their relevance to your life and to consider your own personal experiences both past and present in reference to them. You can take almost any situation that arises in your life and consider it from the vantage point of one or more of these precepts. It can also be valuable consciously to choose a precept that you'd like to explore in depth for a month or even a year at a time, investigating how the precept works in all aspects of your life. And last, the way in which you approach the practices that follow in this book, and your underlying intentions, will ultimately determine whether your practice bears fruit. As you progress in your yoga practice, take the time to pause frequently and ask "Who am I becoming through this practice? Am I becoming the kind of person I would like to have as a friend?"

Yamas—Wise Characteristics

Ahimsa—Compassion for All Living Things

Ahimsa is usually translated as nonviolence, but this precept goes far and beyond the limited penal sense of not killing others. First and foremost we have to learn how to be nonviolent toward ourselves. If we were able to play back the often unkind, unhelpful, and destructive comments and judgments silently made toward our self in any given day, this may give us some idea of the enormity of the challenge of self-acceptance. If we were to speak these thoughts out loud to another person, we would realize how truly devastating violence to the self can be. In truth,

few of us would dare to be as unkind to others as we are to ourselves. This can be as subtle as the criticism of our body when we look in the mirror in the morning, or when we denigrate our best efforts. Any thought, word, or action that prevents us (or someone else) from growing and living freely is one that is harmful.

Extending this compassion to all living creatures is dependent on our recognition of the underlying unity of all sentient beings. When we begin to recognize that the streams and rivers of the earth are no different from the blood coursing through our arteries, it becomes difficult to remain indifferent to the plight of the world. We naturally find ourselves wanting to protect all living things. It becomes difficult to toss a can into a stream or carve our names in the bark of a tree, for each act would be an act of violence toward ourselves as well.

Cultivating an attitude and mode of behavior of harmlessness does not mean that we no longer feel strong emotions such as anger, jealousy, or hatred. Learning to see everything through the eyes of compassion demands that we look at even these aspects of our self with acceptance. Paradoxically, when we welcome our feelings of anger, jealousy, or rage rather than see them as signs of our spiritual failure, we can begin to understand the root causes of these feelings and move beyond them. By getting close enough to our own violent tendencies we can begin to understand the root causes of them and learn to contain these energies for our own well-being and for the protection of others. Underneath these feelings we discover a much stronger desire that we all share—to be loved. It is impossible to come to this deeper understanding if we bypass the tough work of facing our inner demons.

In considering *ahimsa* it's helpful to ask, Are my thoughts, actions, and deeds fostering the growth and well-being of all beings?

Satya—Commitment to the Truth

This precept is based on the understanding that honest communication and action form the bedrock of any healthy relationship, community, or government, and that deliberate deception, exaggerations, and mistruths harm others. One of the best ways we can develop this capacity is to practice right speech. This means that when we say something, we are sure of its truth. If we were to follow this precept with commitment, many of us would have a great deal less to say each day! A large part of our everyday comments and conversations are not based upon what we know to be true but are based on our imagination, suppositions, erroneous conclusions, and sometimes out-and-out exaggerations. Gossip is probably the worst form of this miscommunication.

Commitment to the truth isn't always easy, but with practice, it's a great deal less complicated and ultimately less painful than avoidance and self-deception. Proper communication allows us to deal with immediate concerns, taking care of little matters before they become big ones.

Probably the hardest form of this practice is being true to our own heart and inner destiny. Confusion and mistrust of our inner values can make it difficult to know the nature of our heart's desire, but even when we become clear enough to

recognize what truth means for us, we may lack the courage and conviction to live our truth. Following what we know to be essential for our growth may mean leaving unhealthy relationships or jobs and taking risks that jeopardize our own comfortable position. It may mean making choices that are not supported by consensual reality or ratified by the outer culture. The truth is rarely convenient. One way we can know we are living the truth is that while our choices may not be easy, at the end of the day we feel at peace with ourselves.

Asteya—Not Stealing

Asteya arises out of the understanding that all misappropriation is an expression of a feeling of lack. And this feeling of lack usually comes from a belief that our happiness is contingent on external circumstances and material possessions. Within Western industrialized countries satisfaction can be contingent upon so many improbable conditions and terms that it is not uncommon to spend all of one's time hoping for some better life, and imagining that others (who possess what we do not) have that better life. In constantly looking outside of ourselves for satisfaction, we are less able to appreciate the abundance that already exists. That is what really matters—our health and the riches of our inner life and the joy and love we are able to give and receive from others. It becomes difficult to appreciate that we have hot running water when all we can think about is whether our towels are color-coordinated. How can we appreciate our good fortune in having enough food to eat when we wish we could afford to eat out more often?

The practice of *asteya* asks us to be careful not to take anything that has not been freely given. This can be as subtle as inquiring whether someone is free to speak with us on the phone before we launch into a tirade about our problems. Or reserving our questions after a class for another time, rather than hoarding a teacher's attention long after the official class time has ended. In taking someone's time that may not have been freely given, we are, in effect, stealing. The paradox of practicing *asteya* is that when we relate to others from the vantage point of abundance rather than neediness, we find that others are more generous with us and that life's real treasures begin to flow our way.

This may seem unlikely, so let me share an example. Paul was a medical student and past acquaintance who seemed always to be helping others and sharing his seemingly limited resources. One evening when it became too late for a commute home, I offered Paul my guest room for the night. On awakening in the morning I discovered he had cleaned my refrigerator ("It looked like you'd been busy"). Paul had few financial resources but always seemed to be having wonderful dinner feasts to share with his friends. Later, I found out that he worked late at a local health-food restaurant, and, thankful for the extra hours Paul spent helping out, the owner gave him many of the leftover vegetables, breads, and prepared dishes to take home. When a number of friends joined Paul at a holiday home for a week, Paul initiated a special "clean-up and dust" party that lasted all day ("Just think how great it will be for the owner when he comes back after his trip overseas . . ."). Paul rarely asked for anything but was always surprising his friends with his new acquisitions. People

gave things to Paul all the time—even large items like cars and washing machines—not because they felt sorry for him but because his own sense of intrinsic abundance and his own generosity tended to make you feel that, like him, you had a lot to give.

Not stealing demands that we cultivate a certain level of self-sufficiency so that we do not demand more of others, our family, or our community than we need. It means that we don't take any more than we need, because that would be taking from others. A helpful way of practicing *asteya* when you find yourself dwelling on the “not enoughs” of your life is to ask: “How is this attitude preventing me from enjoying the things I already have?” Another way of fostering this sense of abundance is to take a moment before going to sleep to dwell on at least one gift in your life. This can be as simple as the gift of having a loving partner or loyal pet, the grace of having good health, or the pleasure of having a garden.

Brahmacharya—Merging with the One

Of all the precepts, the call to *brahmacharya* is the least understood and the most feared by Westerners. Commonly translated as celibacy, this precept wreaks havoc in the minds and lives of those who interpret *brahmacharya* as a necessary act of sexual suppression or sublimation. All spiritual traditions and religions have wrestled with the dilemma of how to use sexual energy wisely. Practicing *brahmacharya* means that we use our sexual energy to regenerate our connection to our spiritual self. It also means that we don't use this energy in any way that might harm another. It doesn't take a genius to recognize that manipulating and using others sexually creates a host of bad feelings, with the top contenders being pain, jealousy, attachment, resentment, and blinding hatred. This is one realm of human experience that is guaranteed to bring out the best and worst in people, so the ancient yogis went to great lengths to observe and experiment with this particular form of energy. It may be easier to understand *brahmacharya* if we remove the sexual designation and look at it purely as energy. *Brahmacharya* means merging one's energy with God. While the communion we may experience through making love with another gives us one of the clearest experiences of this meshing of energies, this experience is meant to be extended beyond discrete events into a way of life—a kind of omnidimensional celebration of Eros in all its forms. Whether we achieve this through feeling our breath as it caresses our lungs, through orgasm, or through celibacy is not important.

Given the pragmatism of the ancient yogis, it is hard to believe that Patanjali would have put forth a precept that would be so undeniably unsuccessful as self-willed denial. The fall from grace of countless gurus who, while admonishing their devotees to practice celibacy, have wantonly misused their own sexual power gives cause to consider more deeply the appropriateness of such an interpretation. When any energy is sublimated or suppressed, it has the tendency to backfire, expressing itself in life-negating ways. This is not to say that celibacy in and of itself is an unsound practice. When embraced joyfully the containment of sexual energy can be enormously self-nourishing and vitalizing and, at the very least, can provide an opportunity to learn how to use this energy wisely. When celibacy is practiced in this

way, there is no sense of stopping oneself from doing or having what one really wants. Ultimately it is not a matter of *whether* we use our sexual energy but *how* we use it.

In looking at your own relationship to sexual energy, consider whether the ways you express that energy bring you closer to or farther away from your spiritual self.

Aparigraha—Not Grasping

Holding on to things and being free are two mutually exclusive states. The ordinary mind is constantly manipulating reality to get ground underneath it, building more and more concretized images of how things are and how others are, as a way of generating confidence and security. We build self-images and construct concepts and paradigms that feed our sense of certainty, and we then defend this edifice by bending every situation to reinforce our certainty. This would be fine if life were indeed a homogeneous event in which nothing ever changed; but life does change, and it demands that we adapt and change with it. The resistance to change, and tenaciously holding on to things, causes great suffering and prevents us from growing and living life in a more vital and pleasurable way. What yoga philosophy and all the great Buddhist teachings tell us is that solidity is a creation of the ordinary mind and that there never was anything permanent to begin with that we could hold on to. Life would be much easier and substantially less painful if we lived with the knowledge of impermanence as the only constant. As we all have discovered at some time in our lives, whenever we have tried to hold on too tightly to anything, whether it be possessiveness of our partner or our youthful identity, this has only led to the destruction of those very things we most value. Our best security lies in taking down our fences and barricades and allowing ourselves to grow, and through that growth becoming stronger and yet more resilient.

The practice of *aparigraha* also requires that we look at the way we use things to reinforce our sense of identity. The executive ego loves to believe in its own power but unfortunately requires a retinue of foot soldiers in the way of external objects such as the right clothes, car, house, job, or image to maintain this illusion. Because this executive ego is but an illusion created by our sense of separateness, it requires ever greater and more elaborate strategies to keep it clothed. Although the practice of not grasping may first begin as consciously withdrawing our hand from reaching for external things, eventually the need to reach outward at all diminishes until there is a recognition that that which is essential to us is already at hand.

Niyamas—Codes for Living Soulfully

Shaucha—Purity

Shaucha, or living purely, involves maintaining a cleanliness in body, mind, and environment so that we can experience ourselves at a higher resolution. The word pure comes from the Latin *purus*, which means clean and unadulterated. When we take in healthy food, untainted by pesticides and unnatural additives, the body starts to function more smoothly. When we read books that elevate our consciousness,

see movies that inspire, and associate with gentle people, we are feeding the mind in a way that nourishes our own peacefulness. Creating a home environment that is elegant, simple, and uncluttered generates an atmosphere where we are not constantly distracted by the paraphernalia of yesterday's projects and last year's knick-knacks. *Shaucha* is a testament to the positive power of association.

Practicing *shaucha*, meaning "that and nothing else," involves making choices about what you want and don't want in your life. Far from self-deprivation or dry piety, the practice of *shaucha* allows you to experience life more vividly. A clean palate enjoys the sweetness of an apple and the taste of pure water; a clear mind can appreciate the beauty of poetry and the wisdom imparted in a story; a polished table reveals the deep grain of the wood. This practice both generates beauty and allows us to appreciate it in all its many forms.

Santosha—Contentment

Santosha, or the practice of *content-ment*, is the ability to feel satisfied within the container of one's immediate experience. Contentment shouldn't be confused with happiness, for we can be in difficult, even painful circumstances and still find some semblance of contentment if we are able to see things as they are without the conflictual pull of our expectations. Contentment also should not be confused with complacency, in which we allow ourselves to stagnate in our growth. Rather it is a sign that we are at peace with whatever stage of growth we are in and the circumstances we find ourselves in. This doesn't mean that we accept or tolerate unhealthy relationships or working conditions. But it may mean that we practice patience and attempt to live as best we can within our situation until we are able to better our conditions.

Contentment not only implies acceptance of the present but tends to generate the capacity for hopefulness. This may seem contradictory but is not. When you are equanimous within any situation, this strengthens your faith that there is the possibility of living even more fully. This possibility is not held out as something to look forward to, nor does it have the negative effect of making you feel dissatisfied until those hopes are gratified. Rather, the ability to sustain one's spirits, even in dire situations, is proof that a central sense of balance is rarely contingent on circumstances. And, sustaining hopefulness, even when there are few signs that things will improve, is one very good way of fostering contentment.

Tapas—Burning Enthusiasm

Literally translated as "fire" or "heat," *tapas* is the disciplined use of our energy. Because the word *discipline* has the negative connotation of self-coercion, I take the liberty here of translating this central precept as "burning enthusiasm." When we can generate an attitude of burning ardor, the strength of our convictions generates a momentum that carries us forward. We all know how even a seemingly boring or unpleasant task like cleaning the house can be transformed when we work with vigor and impulsion. Suddenly cleaning the toilet becomes fun, hauling heavy loads invigorating, and dusting the furniture absorbing. *Tapas* is a way of directing

our energy. Like a focused beam of light cutting through the dark, *tapas* keeps us on track so that we don't waste our time and energy on superfluous or trivial matters. When this energy is strong, so also are the processes of transmutation and metamorphism.

We are not all equally possessed of the disciplined energy of *tapas*. Some people need to work more earnestly to kindle the flames of *tapas*, and it is at these times that it is helpful to have a kind of parental consciousness coupled with a good sense of humor. Our actions are then guided by a part of the self that knows what's good for it, which is aided by the ability to laugh in the face of one's neuroses, lethargy, or addictions. Even the laser minds among us have days when it takes a sheer act of will to get out of bed, turn to our studies, or withdraw the hand that reaches for a second slice of cake. If you have little enthusiasm yourself, it can be enormously helpful to seek the company of those who have this quality in abundance. Attending a class with an inspiring teacher or practicing yoga with a friend who has already established a strong practice can help to stimulate *tapas* within yourself. Once activated, however, the embers of *tapas* tend to generate more and more heat and momentum, which makes each subsequent effort less difficult. The analogy of a fire is fitting for this precept. Once a fire has completely died out it can take a great deal of effort to start it up again. When you do get a fire to light, the tentative embers must be fed at regular intervals or the fire dies out again. But once the fire is roaring, it is easy to sustain.

For what greater purpose do we need *tapas*, or discipline? Pema Chödrön, the Abbot of Gampo Abbey in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and the author of many books on Tibetan Buddhism, tells us that "what we discipline is not our 'badness' or our 'wrongness.' What we discipline is *any form of potential escape from reality*"³ (italics added). When we're not living in this disciplined awareness, our willing tactics of avoidance create an endless cycle of more suffering for ourselves. These avoidance tactics may temporarily placate our senses, but they create a deep form of unhappiness. On some level we know we're not being true to ourselves or our potential. Discipline is having enough respect for yourself to make choices that truly nourish your well-being and provide opportunities for expansive growth. Far from being a kind of medicinal punishment, *tapas* allows us to direct our energy toward a fulfilled life of meaning and one that is exciting and pleasurable.

Swadhyaya—Self-Study

Any activity that cultivates self-reflective consciousness can be considered *swadhyaya*. The soul tends to be lured by those activities that will best illuminate it. Because people are so different in their proclivities, one person may be drawn to write, while another will discover herself through painting or athletics. Another person may come to know himself through mastering an instrument, or through service at a hospice. Still another may learn hidden aspects of herself through the practice of meditation. The form that this self-study takes is inconsequential. Whatever the practice, as long as there is an intention to know yourself through it,

and the commitment to see the process through, almost any activity can become an opportunity for learning about yourself. *Swadhyaya* means staying with our process through thick and thin because it's usually when the going gets rough that we have the greatest opportunity to learn about ourselves.

While self-study uncovers our strengths, authentic *swadhyaya* also ruthlessly uncovers our weakness, foibles, addictions, habit patterns, and negative tendencies. This isn't always the most cheering news. The worst thing we can do at these times is give ourselves the double whammy of both uncovering a soft spot and beating ourselves up for what we perceive as a fatal flaw. At these times, it's important actually to welcome and accept our limitations. When we welcome a limitation, we can get close enough to ourselves to see the roots of our anger, impatience, or self-loathing. We can have a little compassion for the forces and conditions that molded our behaviors and beliefs, and in so doing develop more skill in handling, containing, and redirecting previously self-destructive tendencies. The degree to which we can do this for ourselves is the degree to which we will be tolerant of other people's weaknesses and flaws. Self-study is a big task.

Self-study also can become psychically incestuous when the same self that may be confused and fragmented attempts to see itself. This is why it can be so helpful (not to mention expedient) to secure the help of a mentor, teacher, or close friend to support your self-study. If you've ever said that someone "just doesn't see himself" and watched him enact the same self-destructive behaviors again and again, just consider how likely it is that you too are blind to your own faults. A skillful mentor, and that can be anyone from a wise aunt to a therapist to a bona fide guru, can find loving ways to help you see yourself as you really are.

Ishvarapranidhana—Celebration of the Spiritual

Life is not inherently meaningful. We *make* meaning happen through the attention and care we express through our actions. We make meaning happen when we set a table with care, when we light a candle before practicing, or when we remove our shoes before entering a temple. Yoga tells us that the spiritual suffuses everything—it is simply that we are too busy, too distracted, or too insensitive to notice the extraordinary omnipresence that dwells in all things. So one of the first ways that we can practice *ishvarapranidhana* is by putting aside some time each day, even a few minutes, to avail ourselves of an intelligence larger than our own. This might take the form of communing with your garden at dawn, taking a few moments on the bus to breathe slowly and clear your mind, or engaging in a more formal practice such as a daily reading, prayer, ritual, or meditation. This practice requires that we have recognized that there is some omnipresent force larger than ourselves that is guiding and directing the course of our lives. We all have had the experience of looking back at some event in our life that at the time may have seemed painful, confusing and disruptive, but later, in retrospect, made perfect sense in the context of our personal destiny. We recognize that the change that occurred during that time was necessary for our growth, and that we are happier for it. The catch is that

it's hard to see the bigger picture when you think you are the great controller of your life. When you are the great controller, you fail to recognize that supposed coincidences, accidents, and chance meetings all have some greater significance in the larger scheme of your destiny. When you are the master of your universe, it's hard to trust anything but your own self-made plans. When we don't have this recognition that there's a bigger story going on, we get caught up in our personal drama and a frustrating cycle of resistance to change. *Ishvarapranidhana* asks us to go quietly, even when it's not possible to see exactly where things are headed. At first this can be frightening, like being suspended in the air between one trapeze bar and another, but, over time, this not knowing exactly how life is going to unfold and the giving up of our frantic attempts to manipulate and control makes each day an adventure. It makes our life a horse race right up until the very finish!

Ultimately, *ishvarapranidhana* means surrendering our personal will to this intelligence so we can fulfill our destiny. The first step in this practice is attuning ourselves to perceive a larger perspective. By setting aside enough time to get quiet and clear, we can begin to differentiate between the cluttered thoughts of our ordinary mind and the resonant intelligence that comes through as intuition. Rather than trying to unravel the mystery, we start to embody the mystery of life. When we embody the mystery, we begin to experience meaning where before we experienced numbness. When we drink a glass of water, we taste it; when a cool breeze brushes our bare skin, we feel it; and when a stranger speaks to us, we listen. Everything and anything can become a sign of this intelligence.

Eventually we are spontaneously drawn to look at the purpose of our life with a new eye. One starts to ask, How can my life be useful to others? Living the answer is neither spiritual insurance nor a guarantee against hardship, but it is insurance against living a meaningless life, a life that at its end we regret.

WHAT ARE YOGA ASANAS AND WHY PRACTICE THEM?

Given the central importance of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, one might wonder why it would be necessary to practice the other limbs of yoga. Would it not be enough to be compassionate, truthful, and content? Why would it be important to take the time to stretch our backs or to listen to our breath? If not for the tremendous importance of grounding spirituality in the body, it's unlikely that the great sages would have listed *asana* practice as the second limb. This is why I have chosen to focus in such detail on this dimension of practice. What is *asana* practice all about?

The word *asana* is usually translated as "pose" or "posture," but its more literal meaning is "comfortable seat." Through their observations of nature, the yogis discovered a vast repertoire of energetic expressions, each of which had not only a strong physical effect on the body but also a concomitant psychological effect. Each movement demands that we hone some aspect of our consciousness and use ourselves in a new way. The vast diversity of *asanas* is no accident, for through

exploring both familiar and unfamiliar postures we are also expanding our consciousness, so that regardless of the situation or form we find ourselves in, we can remain “comfortably seated” in our center. Intrinsic to this practice is the uncompromising belief that every aspect of the body is pervaded by consciousness. *Asana* practice is a way to develop this interior awareness.

While a dancer’s or athlete’s internal impulses result in movement that takes him into space, in *asana* practice our internal impulses are contained inside the dynamic form of the posture. When you witness a yoga practitioner skilled in this dynamic internal dance, you have the sense that the body is in continuous subtle motion. What distinguishes an *asana* from a stretch or calisthenic exercise is that in *asana* practice we focus our mind’s attention completely *in* the body so that we can move as a unified whole and so we can perceive what the body has to tell us. We don’t do something *to* the body, we *become* the body. In the West we rarely do this. We watch TV while we stretch; we read a book while we climb the StairMaster; we think about our problems while we take a walk, all the time living a short distance from the body. So *asana* practice is a reunion between the usually separated body-mind.

Apart from the vibrant health, flexibility, and stamina this unified body-mind brings us, living in the body is also an integral aspect of spiritual practice. The most tangible way that we can know what it means to be compassionate or not grasping is directly through the cellular experience of the body. The most direct way that we can learn what it means to let go is through the body. When we have a self-destructive addiction—the impulse to overeat or to take drugs—this happens through the entrenchment of neurological and physiological patterns in our bodies. And on a more basic level, it’s hard to feel focused and purposeful when our bodies are full of aches and pains or burdened with illness and disease.

While I have given the practice of *asanas* great emphasis in this book, it is not because the perfection of the body or of yoga postures is the goal of yoga practice. This down-to-earth, flesh-and-bones practice is simply one of the most direct and expedient ways to meet yourself. It is a good place to begin. Whether you meet yourself through standing on your feet or standing on your head is irrelevant. It’s important, therefore, not to make the mistake of thinking that the perfection of the yoga *asanas* is the goal, or that you’ll be good at yoga only once you’ve mastered the more difficult postures. The *asanas* are useful maps to explore yourself, but they are not the territory. The goal of *asana* practice is to live in your body and to learn to perceive clearly through it. If you can master the Four Noble Acts, as I like to call them, of sitting, standing, walking, and lying down with ease, you will have mastered the basics of living an embodied spiritual life. This book gives you the tools to do this and to go further if you wish.

The emphasis on *asana* practice is also specific to the age we live in, for we live in a time of extreme dissociation from bodily experience. When we are not in our bodies, we are dissociated from our instincts, intuitions, feelings and insights, and it becomes possible to dissociate ourselves from other people’s feelings, and other people’s suffering. The insidious ways in which we become numb to our bodily

experience and the feelings and perceptions that arise from them leave us powerless to know who we are, what we believe in, and what kind of world we wish to create. If we do not know when we are breathing in and when we are breathing out, when we are unable to perceive gross levels of tension, how then can we possibly know how to create a balanced world? Every violent impulse begins in a body filled with tension; every failure to reach out to someone in need begins in a body that has forgotten how to feel. There has never been a back problem or a mental problem that didn't have a body attached to it. This limb of yoga practice reattaches us to our body. In reattaching ourselves to our bodies we reattach ourselves to the responsibility of living a life guided by the undeniable wisdom of our body.

PRACTICING WITH JOYFULNESS

When we begin practice, we may feel far from happy within ourselves. In fact, even the semblance of happiness may seem as remote to us as winning the lottery. We may feel utterly confused, buried in self-destructive habits, and encumbered by difficulties, whether emotional, physical, or material, that appear insurmountable. Our bodies may feel as stiff and knotted as an old tree, and our minds a jumble of worries and neuroses. Platitudes about the peace and happiness available to us right now sound empty in the face of our very real pain. Most of us begin like this, and even those who feel some sense of inner balance often find that underneath the thin veneer of appearances, there is much work to be done.

How do we go about doing this work without becoming discouraged by the enormity of the task? Unless we can find a way to practice with joyfulness, working with our difficulties rather than against them, practice will be an experience of frustration and disappointment. Unless we can find a way to enjoy what we are doing right now, yoga practice will become a negative time, and ultimately we'll develop a strong resistance even to stepping onto the mat.

A story may help you to understand what I mean. Many years ago I moved into a derelict house. The back door was nailed shut and had not been opened for fifteen years; once pried open it revealed a six-foot wall of seemingly impenetrable blackberry bushes, vines, and crabgrass. I wanted a garden. For many months I looked in despair through the window of the back door. The task seemed too large and too difficult. Then I decided upon a strategy that my mind could grasp. I decided that I would divide the project into four-foot increments. Every week I would clear a four-foot patch of garden. The backyard was sixty-five feet long! As I would begin to dig and root, cutting and pulling my tiny patch, I resolved that I would focus my attention only on the four-foot patch. I would not even look at the other sixty-one feet of garden left to clear. Within minutes of beginning I would become completely absorbed in the insects, the tiny plants uncovered, and the pleasure of digging my hands into the brown earth. Each four-foot patch took about three hours because the crabgrass had to be dug out completely and the earth was rock hard. But three hours a week was an easily manageable commit-

ment. When I was finished with the patch, I would step back and admire my good work, never allowing myself to consider the chaotic mess left remaining. How wonderful it looked! Each four-foot patch was a unique wonder. Pathways buried two feet under emerged. A lawn mower, enveloped by grass (proof of the law of karma), was discovered. Not only was the task challenging, it became an adventure, and I eagerly anticipated what I might find each week. Within a year I had a beautiful lawn, an herb garden, and a patch of flowers to enjoy. But, more important, I enjoyed the process of transforming an inhospitable patch of ground into an urban paradise.

When you begin to practice, you may feel very bound in your body and mind, not unlike the densely woven crabgrass of my garden. You can choose to fight with yourself, pulling and tugging on yourself as a way to force your own metamorphosis. If you've ever encountered a weed with deep roots, you know the futility of pulling at the stem knowing full well some digging is in order! There's a moment when you can cheerfully accept the task and set to it with full vigor, or turn sour and miserable in the face of such work. There's a moment when you can resign yourself to the patient work ahead or give in to the impulse to pull on the stem before the ground has been dug deep enough. The first step is accepting that some deep work needs to be done and then deciding to make this a positive, uplifting experience.

In yoga practice you can do this by dividing your experience into incremental breaths and taking care of only that which arises in one breath cycle and no more. In this way almost any difficulty becomes manageable. Rather than focusing on how much further you wish you could go, or comparing your meager efforts with those of someone who is more adept, you can choose to focus on what you are accomplishing in each breath. Maybe today you open your hip five millimeters farther, or you manage to sit comfortably in meditation for the first time. As you investigate the tightness around your hip you discover ways to release it; as you sit for five more minutes you discover that those "urgent" matters were really not so urgent. It is only through these tiny, slow, and progressive openings that deep, profound change occurs. It is your choice to take pleasure in these small awakenings or to disregard your efforts as insignificant in the face of how much further you have to go. You can choose to have a sense of humor about your dilemma or fester in negativity. Whom would you like to garden with?

When we make practice a joyful time, it is also much more likely that we are growing more deeply within our spiritual life. When we get hooked into striving toward where we think we should be and how far we ought to be able to go, in truth we are somewhere else all the time. We are in our fantasy, our ideas, our concepts, and our judgments. There's not much room in there to perceive and appreciate what's actually happening. Even when we feel pain, even when we face great difficulty, we can take refuge in our practice. There will inevitably be times when progress is slow, when injury or illness or life circumstances limit our ability to do the outward forms. But this doesn't limit our ability to plumb the depths of our inner life.

Each day as you step onto your mat, make a decision to enjoy just where you are right now. Take a few moments, too, to contemplate how fortunate you are to be practicing this wonderful art. A casual glance at the morning paper is proof enough of the vast suffering, poverty, violence, and homelessness that is the lot of so many human beings. If you are standing on a yoga mat and have the time to practice even fifteen minutes, you are a fortunate person. If you have a yoga teacher, you have an invaluable gift and life tool available to very few people. In the spirit of this gratefulness, let your practice begin.