

BWY Spectrum Spring 2022  
- recap on the koshas.

## ASANA TEACHING WITH AN AYURVEDIC APPROACH

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We have reached a point where we can now revisit the familiar with an ayurvedic lens. Asana means posture. It is mentioned in a variety of important texts including Patanjali's Yoga Sutras and of course, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. The goal of asana practice can be set within a broader yogic paradigm as well as a more specific ayurvedic one. Asana may be considered as one of the preparatory practices for deeper meditative work or it can be an integral part of healthy living with ayurvedic principles.

The practice and benefits of asana practice may be considered from the point of view of the pancha koshas or five sheaths of the body as mentioned in the Taittiriya Upanishads.

**Annamaya kosha:** When we are communicating the benefits of asana to our students, it is important to start with what is immediately known and experienced by all, especially beginners. We experience asana through the physical body and can explain the benefits of movement and posture purely in these terms.

The key physical goals of asana practice would be to seek postural integrity through the exploration of right relationship between our body and the ground. Postural imbalances caused by lifestyle habits such as long sitting, standing or using one side of the body excessively, leads to physical imbalances that bring about pain and discomfort. Regular asana practice can be a powerful and effective method of helping the body to rediscover its own postural integrity.

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Postural integrity involves the proper relationship between all the moving parts, especially the connective tissue or fascia that binds us together and gives us a sense of ourselves as a unified physical being rather than the individual functioning parts therein. It is more useful to view our bodies in this way rather than try to analyse the functions of individual working parts such as muscles, joints and bones. We are more like balloons than robots in the sense that we cannot isolate a localised event without taking the rest of the body into account. For example, if we pull a muscle in our leg, this apparent localised event will impact the rest of our body. When we press one side of an inflated balloon, the rest of the balloon stretches to compensate.

**Pranamaya kosha:** When we assess our experience of asana practice from a subtle or energetic perspective, we notice that with regular practice, we not only begin to feel freer in our bodies, but we also notice that we have more energy and endurance. Ayurveda explains this by presenting us with the pranic body. According to Ayurveda, our physical body would be inanimate without the presence of prana. Much like a car without an electrical system, our aliveness depends on our body's ability to generate energy. Every cell actually has its own independent capacity to generate energy and this ultimately extends to our whole being. Prana means 'that which animates' so in that sense, it is the driving force behind everything. The word

prana can mean slightly different things according to the context in which it is written. It can represent the whole cosmos as an energy field, or it can represent the functioning of our mind and body.

From an ayurvedic perspective, prana and vata are actually one. Prana is said to be the essence of vata but vata has no substance per se, so they are one and the same in this sense. Vata relates to specific functions and dysfunctions of prana.

In the previous chapters we learned that vata represents the moving principle, so it controls the movement of everything that comes into the body, moves around the body and leaves the body.

When we are practising asana, we are enabling the free and harmonious flow of vata or prana from the core of the body right through to our very extremes. When vata is impaired, we experience pain, blockage and a lack of mobility. Asana can really help to free up the flow of prana so that we not only experience the benefits physically but also in our energy field.

When we are working with asana, we can impact on our pranic body in the following ways:

1. Asana groups can impact our pranic body differently. For example, back bends can make us feel more vital and forward bends more relaxed.
2. Our experience of an asana itself can vary depending on how we use the breath. Focusing more on exhalations for example can help us maintain calm whereas the inhalation can enliven us.
3. By liberating pranic blockages around the marma zones, our pranic body can flourish and we are motivated to embrace life with more enthusiasm.

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**Manomaya kosha:** Asana can be practised as a form of meditation. By observing the quality of our thoughts during practice, we become aware of the impact of the mental gunas or qualities on our practice.

Rajas represents the dynamic force that can unsettle the mind and prevent us from being present in the practice.

Tamas represents a dull state of mind that can

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also prevent us from being present because we feel deadened and unmotivated.

Both gunas need to be tempered with Sattva which represents clarity, detachment and equanimity. A high level of sattva can prevent excessive rajas or tamas from sabotaging the work. If we pay attention to how we feel during the practice, we will notice that our feelings are affecting the way we think, and this can affect the quality of our entire practice.

As soon as we lose that control over our minds, it is best to come out of the posture, take a break and do it again. Persistence slowly builds stamina, and we find that we are also more able to cope with life's challenges in general.

## **Vijnanamaya kosha** (The Sheath of Higher Understanding)

Vijnana means higher understanding and represents the buddhi or wisdom mind. It is believed that our buddhi acts as a kind of intermediary between our manas (cognitive or lower mind) and our soul or Atman. Our buddhi informs us through our intuition of what is right or wrong for us, whether we are on the right track, so to speak. The more we practice yoga, the better our relationship with buddhi becomes. We learn to trust our intuition more and more and notice that our choices pave a better way.

## **Anandamaya kosha** (The Bliss Sheath)

We get glimmers of our bliss sheath when we have peak experiences. Some say we are made of the stuff of god and god is love so in essence, we are bodies of bliss. Bliss usually arises momentarily and passes but the more we align ourselves with our prakruti (our constitution), the more we are likely to attract experiences that bring us joy and bliss because our activities mirror our true nature.

A life well lived is a life of deep satisfaction and purpose. For some of us, that purpose remains obscured until later in life and for others, it is there from the beginning. Children are naturally drawn to experiences that make them happy until adults discourage them and sometimes veer them in another direction. It can take a long time to reconnect with that childhood instinct and live in peace with ourselves. The bliss sheath is a thin veil that separates us from oneness, the ultimate loss of separateness.

One of the reasons students come back to asana practice is because it gives them heightened experiences. When prana is released from a shackled state caused by poor posture or lack of movement, the body and mind often experience a flush of bliss as a reward for right action. This rush of endorphins doesn't always happen immediately. There can be a lot of resistance at first and that blissful feeling that comes from practice grows gradually over a longer period. It is a sign that we have stirred something deep and true because our body and mind sings our praises. It is also common for this so called 'blissed out' feeling to subside. The body reaches a new equilibrium and no longer rewards us because we have created a new normal.

Many students lose motivation after this occurs and allow themselves to get blocked up again so that they can be rewarded all over again. On the other end of the spectrum, students will push themselves harder and harder in the quest for new highs and end up hurting themselves.

Asana is designed to bring us into balance. Once this is achieved, we should move on to more subtle practices like pranayama and meditation, as recommended by the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. In classical yoga, asana was never meant to be a complete practice in and of itself.

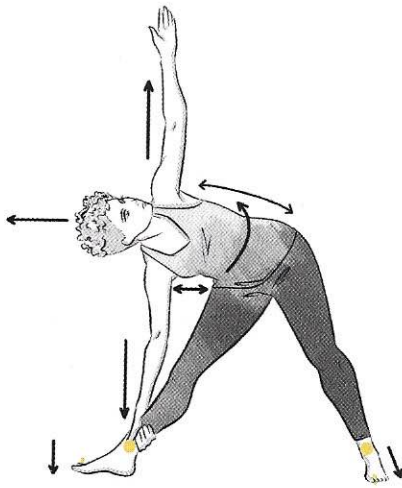
## **How to work in asana with an ayurvedic perspective**

There are two fundamental ways of viewing asana practice – shape and direction.

An asana is a dynamic shape one creates with the body. This shape is dynamic because the body is actively engaged with it. There is no stillness, no stasis. Every inch of the body is consciously engaged. Every part has its role to play. Some parts are more important than others but there are no redundant parts. Asana is like matter itself. When you look closely enough, all parts of the body are fully alive.

From a distance, the body may look static but up-close, it isn't. This contradiction is important. The reason why the body looks static from a distance is because the movement is subtle. Asana practice should progress in a gentle way, especially later on when the student has learned to become more kinaesthetically aware.

Every shape impacts the body on different levels. A shape can emulate sacred geometry like circles, spirals, triangles and squares. Each of these shapes are used by prakruti to represent different ideas and frequencies in nature. For example, traditionally, triangles were considered to be harmonious and squares more dynamic and tension generating. Every asana is a combination of different shapes interacting with each other. Back bends for example always have a circular quality as the spine hyperextends and poses where arms and legs and abducted can create different angles in relation to the midline. Warrior Two creates more squares for example and Triangle pose (Trikonasana) obviously creates more triangles.



Skilful asana practice comes with an understanding of which way things are going. Directions of movement are layered.

The first consideration is in knowing what to give to the ground and what to move away from the ground. What goes up and what comes down. Using the breath plays an intimate part of us. We generally use the inhalation to move away from the ground and the exhalation to surrender to the ground.

Beyond that, direction is created by knowing about the key articulations we need to work within a posture. It is important to point out that there is no one way of doing any posture. There is only your way and my way or our teacher's way. There are many versions of Trikonasana for example, and none of them are wrong, just different. It is important to know what you want your students to experience when practising a posture because every variation creates a slightly different shape. Every technique highlights a slightly different focus.

### Practice with awareness

There is nothing – and I mean nothing – more important in yoga practice than practising with awareness. Before you can even start to practice yoga with an ayurvedic approach, you need to know yourself. Who is it that is practising?

There is a contradiction in this guideline because when we start practising yoga, we are largely ignorant of who we are. Rare is the student who is kinaesthetically aware from the start. In this case, a student should go to classes and practice a set sequence at home. This book is not for them, it is for you. You are a yoga teacher, presumably at a point in your practice where you are reasonably self-aware and have attained a certain degree of competence in your practice.

There is nothing and I mean nothing more important in yoga practice than practising with awareness. The overall development and expansion of an asana leads to greater spaciousness within the joints and ultimately all the tissues of the body, but this is impossible without a conscious awareness of the former.

Asana practice is cultivating the right balance between:

- When to push and when to allow
- When to give and when to take
- When to move and when to be still
- Where to expand and where to let go

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- Turn to page 39 for a review of *Ayurveda in Yoga Teaching*