

THE DEPTH OF ĀSANA

The body cannot be separated from the mind, nor can the mind be separated from the soul. No-one can define the boundaries between them. In India, āsana was never considered to be a merely physical practice as it is in the West. But even in India nowadays many people are beginning to think in this way because they have picked it up from people in the West whose ideas are reflected back to the East.

When Mahātmā Gandhi died, George Bernard Shaw said that it may be another thousand years before we see another Mahātmā Gandhi on this earth. Mahātmā Gandhi did not practise all the aspects of yoga. He only followed two of its principles—non-violence and truth, yet through these two aspects of yoga, he mastered his own nature and gained independence for India. If a part of yama could make Mahātmā Gandhi so great, so pure, so honest and so divine, should it not be possible to take another limb of yoga—āsana—and through it reach the highest level of spiritual development? Many of you may say that performing an āsana is a physical discipline, but if you speak in this way without knowing the depth of āsana, you have already fallen from the grace of yoga.

In the sections that follow, I shall give a little more detail of what is involved in performing an āsana, and show how within the one discipline of āsana all the eight levels of yoga are involved, from yama and niyama through to samādhi. I deliberately pursue in depth the various levels involved in the performance of āsana, because in the West this practice is too often considered to be only physical.

When we start working on the performance of āsanās, we all begin by just scratching the surface of the pose: our work

on the pose is peripheral, and this is known as conative action. The word 'conatus' means an effort or impulse, and conation is the active aspect of mind, including desire and volition. Conative action is simply physical action at its most direct level.

Then, when we are physically doing the pose, all of a sudden the skin, eyes, ears, nose and tongue—all our organs of perception—feel what is happening in the flesh. This is known as cognitive action: the skin cognises, recognises the action of the flesh.

The third stage, which I call communication or communion, is when the mind observes the contact of the cognition of the skin with the conative action of the flesh, and we arrive at mental action in the āsana. At this stage, the mind comes into play and is drawn by the organs of perception towards the organs of action, to see exactly what is happening. The mind acts as a bridge between the muscular movement and the organs of perception, introduces the intellect and connects it to every part of the body—fibres, tissues, and cells, right through to the outer pores of the skin. When the mind has come into play, a new thought arises in us. We see with attention and remember the feeling of the action. We feel what is happening in our body and our recollection says, 'What is this that I feel now which I did not feel before?' We discriminate with the mind. The discriminative mind observes and analyses the feeling of the front, the back, the inside and the outside of the body. This stage is known as reflective action.

Finally, when there is a total feeling in the action without any fluctuations in the stretch, then conative action, cognitive action, mental action and reflective action 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 body comprises three tiers, which are themselves composed of several sheaths. The gross body, called the *sthūlaśārīra*, corresponds to the physical or anatomical sheath (*annamaya-kośa*). The subtle body, or *sūkṣma-śārīra*, is made up of

the physiological sheath (prānamaya-kośa), the mental sheath (manomaya-kośa) and the intellectual sheath (vijñānamaya-kośa). The innermost body, on which all the others depend, is known as the causal body, or kāraṇa-śarīra. This is the spiritual sheath of joy (ānandamaya-kośa). 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 āsana.

That is known as integration, which Patañjali describes in the third chapter of the *Yoga Sūtras*, and which involves integration of the body (śarīra-saṁyama), integration of the breath (prāṇa-saṁyama), integration of the senses (indriya-saṁyama), integration of the mind (manaḥ-saṁyama), integration of the intelligence or of knowledge (buddhi-saṁyama or jñāna-saṁyama) and, finally, integration of the self with all existence (ātma-saṁyama).

This is how the āsanās have to be performed. It cannot come in a day and it cannot come in years. It is a lifelong process, provided that the practitioner has the yogic vitamins of faith, memory, courage, absorption, and uninterrupted awareness of attention. These are the five vitamins required for the practice of yoga. With these five vitamins you can conquer the five sheaths of the body and become one with the Universal Self.

Since yoga means integration, bringing together, it follows that bringing body and mind together, bringing nature and the seer together, is yoga. Beyond that there is nothing—and everything! In a yogī who is perfect, the potency of nature flows abundantly.

