

I would like to examine the place of action (practice) and stillness (renunciation) in our practice and why they are essential.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras revolve around the workings of the mind and the way the mind becomes attracted and attached to things. It outlines the way to break this link and gain freedom from desire and attachment as well as from aversion and fear. The practices of yoga are examples of watching how the mind interacts with objects whether they be intense sensation or thoughts. Through the practice of asana and pranayama we learn to internalise the senses (pratyahara). This turning inwards requires that we discipline the wandering senses and direct them. Usually we have no choice as to what our senses gather – eyes see, ears hear, etc, but through the disciplines of practice our senses become engaged and often we stop hearing external noises and distractions. The senses steady and focus internally. In directing the senses we have had to do two things :

- to focus the senses. (Action)
- to let go of the way they normally operate. (Release)

These two movements are implicit in everything we do – action and release. In the same way that for your elbow to bend, one set of muscles contract while the opposite group relax to lengthen. Unless the opposing group lengthen the joint can not move. In the *Yoga Sutras* Patanjali calls this principle Abhaya and Vairagya - Action and renunciation (or restraint).

Patanjali observes that we experience the world through our senses (taste, touch, smell, sight and sound). All our experience of the world comes through these doors. In the second chapter Patanjali states :

2:17. The cause of pain is association or identification of the seer (atma) with the seen (prakrti) and the remedy lies in their dissociation

The *seer* refers to that place within us that is unchanging (sometimes referred to as the soul), while the *seen* (prakrti) is nature and includes everything of the world including our own body. This sutra describes that our inner discomfort lies in the way that we attach our happiness to objects and people – things which fade or pass, and the way to ease this torment is to see or experience the illusion intimately by studying its effects. The senses either entrap us in an endless search for pleasure and delight or help us to refine our experience and understand ourself. It is only by stilling the senses that we break their agitating effect on the mind and can find inner poise and peace. This is done by searching out the core of our being beyond changing nature. Through our senses we are pulled into desiring objects and wanting other. We become attached to worldly objects. Patanjali again :

1-2 Yoga is the cessation of the movements in consciousness

1-3 Then the seer dwells in his own true splendour

1-4 At other times, the seer identifies with the fluctuating consciousness

If yoga is the act of stilling consciousness and touching the seer (that which sees) then Sutra 1:12 tells us how to proceed :

1:12 Practice and Detachment are the means to still the movements of consciousness.

For our yoga practice to become fruitful it must strike a balance between these two forces as they are the defining elements, which move practice away from a sensual pursuit towards a more meaningful endeavour. Practice which lived in effort is erratic, although it may have moments of clarity or progress this clarity is lost to distraction.

Iyengar states in his commentary on the Yoga Sutra observes the importance of a balance between the two forces.

“If the student is perplexed to find detachment and renunciation linked to practice so early in the yoga sutras, let him consider the symbolic relationship in this way. The text begins with *atha yoganusasanam*. *Anusasanam* stands for the practice of a disciplined code of yogic conduct, the observance of instructions for ethical action handed down by lineage and tradition. Ethical disciplines, translated from methodology into deeds, constitute practice. Now, read the word renunciation in the context of sutra 1-4 “ at other times the seer identifies with the fluctuating consciousness”. Clearly the fluctuating mind lures the seer outwards towards pastures of pleasure and valleys of pain, where enticement inevitably gives rise to attachment. When the mind starts to drag the seer, as if by a stout rope, from the seat of being towards the gratification of appetite, only renunciation can intervene and save the *sadhaka* by cutting the rope.”¹

What are the 2 forces and where do they exist in our practice.

Practice

“*Abhyasa* (practice) is a dedicated, unswerving, constant, and vigilant search into a chosen subject, pursued against all odds in the face of repeated failures, for indefinitely long periods of time. *Abhyasa* builds confidence and refinement in the process of culturing the consciousness, whereas *Vairagya* (renunciation) is the elimination of whatever hinders progress and refinement..”

“Practice implies a certain methodology, involving effort. It has to be followed uninterruptedly for a long time, with firm resolve, application, attention and devotion, to create a stable foundation for the training of the mind, intelligence, ego and consciousness.”²

Practice should not to be confused with working hard. Students often look at someone who appears to be flexible or very strong - doing complicated or difficult asanas and associate this with success. On the contrary, the mind will focus when it is given a difficult challenge but if it only focuses in this way when there is no other option it will always be vulnerable to losing attention when there is no immediacy or intensity demanded. It becomes dulled to subtlety. Hard work gives the mind direction but if you always listen to television with the volume on full you may damage your hearing. Working hard removes lethargy and tiredness but it has to transform into something more. The student that links the mind through hard work alone is vulnerable to rebellion in which case they apply themselves over a number of years and have all the trappings of a sustained practice but suddenly give up. They lose purpose.

“*Abhyasa* (practice) is the art of learning that which has to be learned through the cultivation of disciplined action. This involves long, zealous, calm, and persevering effort. *Vairagya* (detachment or renunciation) is the art of avoiding that which should be avoided. Both require a positive and virtuous approach.

Practice is a generative force of transformation or progress in yoga, but if undertaken alone it produces an unbridled energy which is thrown outwards to the material world as if by centrifugal force. Renunciation acts to sheer of this energetic outburst, protecting the practitioner from entanglement with sense objects and redirecting the energies centripetally towards the core of being.”³

¹ Light on yoga sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons 2002, p16

² Light on yoga sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons 2002, p16

³ Light on yoga sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons 2002, p5

Practice has its pitfalls and it is only through the balance of restraint, or observation that that it can be balanced.

Renunciation

The term renunciation is used to translate *vairagya* but it could equally be the word observation. If the mind is held away from a sensation or object its attraction becomes greater and pulls the mind toward it more strongly. In this way renunciation as an act of denial doesn't work. If *vairagya* is based in a study of consciousness ; that is, the way the mind interacts with objects, it is observation which helps us study the interaction.

“Renunciation (Vairagya) is discriminative discernment. It is the art of learning to be free from craving, both for worldly pleasures and for heavenly eminence. It is training the mind to be unmoved by desire and passion. One must learn to renounce objects and ideas which disturb and hinder one's daily practices. Then one has to cultivate non-attachment to the fruits of one's labours.”⁴

Renunciation is not an act of abstention alone, nor is it suppressing our deepest desires, but through the act of observing the mind closely - the way it is drawn through promise into a state of discomfort or agitation, that we can sever the way the mind locks on to things. By rigorous observation we come to see the habits of our mind.

Newness

A trait of mind encountered by us all is the attraction of newness. Much of our society revolves around the promise of having something else whether it be an object, a relationship, or even image of ourself. In yoga most of us were enamoured by the subtlety and diversity of sensation and perception promised through practice. Our attention is held by the unfolding of that process within our bodies and so we return time and again to drink from that well. And yet this very principle makes us vulnerable to seeking *other* - we get bored with sameness and want new experiences. Teachers play into this trap when they use different ways of doing asanas as a way of holding the student's attention.

Newness seduces the attention and keeps us interested. It takes the focus off ourself and our unchanging habits and character traits. Its like wanting to change our partner when the relationship isn't going well. The issues are outside us - someone else's problem. We attend classes to see what each teacher has to offer - to see how they present the poses and if they engage us. In doing so we miss the key element in a practice - ourself. Our idea of choice is our way of staying in control and yet it undermines and limits the experience. In this setting choice is merely options - we juggle and entertain the mind with options.

Practice limits choice by reducing our desire to fluctuate and entertain the mind but as I will argue this is not to say that choices do not exist within our practice and are exercised through rigorous study of the mind and not as a way of avoiding consequence.

Points

Points define the attention by focusing the flicker of the mind - (the way it jumps from thought to thought). Strong sensation brings us into the present as it is impossible for the mind to ignore. By observing sensation and sustaining the pose the attention is held for longer periods (the attention is stretched). This is unwavering concentration (*dharana*). When this unwavering concentration is held in the sensation of the pose small changes are noticed; for example in holding *Trikonasana* without moving

⁴ Light on yoga sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons 2002, p17

or adjusting even the movement of the breath can alter the sensation of the pose. Rigour is applicable here as without it our practice risks becoming a cataloguing of points - what to do, when! The points entertain the mind.

While points are essential to defining the attention (the remedial aspect of yoga has developed through the documented effects of poses) learning cannot be merely point taking. Repetition is a powerful tool to defuse thought because the mind bores of repetition in its search for newness. Repetition forces us back into the reality of experience. The mind often takes a thread of experience and builds an idea from it which is projected forward into a theory. Repetition defies thought by returning the mind to the experience instead of the rationalisations of mind which do not always match reality. The human experience is not always rational. The complex of perception, thought and emotion is both cloudy and intangible. In this way repetition is clarifying. How many times have I discovered some wonderful principle only to see it crumble under repetition.

In submitting to repetition we uncover our habits, likes and dislikes. The daily repetition of Sirsasana highlights my moods and emotions. In this way information, newness and external input are problematic to the serious Sadhaka (student). No distractions or unthinking has a strong place for the serious student as a valid way of learning. In fact repetition uncovers the person through intimacy.

The Nature of Concentration

When you study the way you focus attention on an object 2 distinct actions are observed. The first is turning the mind toward the object which is difficult because the normal state of the mind is to fluctuate between thoughts and objects. As stated earlier this can be done with strong application which brings the mind into focus. It requires effort and application. The second is less tangible but equally important; Not to be drawn by other objects. These two exist in unison and feed one another.

For example, I focus my attention on the stretch of the hamstrings in paschimottanasana. At first, as a beginner, it is hard to look at the intensity of that sensation; like looking into a strong light which causes the eyes to squint. By holding my mind steady the eyes gradually settle and adjust so that I see the filament at the centre and the glow of intensity. I receive the information through the senses and come to understand what glows. But as my mind becomes familiar with this object its enquiring nature looks for other stimulus. Having been stimulated it looks for other points of interest and wanders off in thought or with sounds. The act of moving towards focus ends in moving me away - the centrifugal force of practice throws the mind outward. Renunciation or observation shears the outward propulsion.

Focusing my mind on the stretch of the Hamstrings in Paschimottanasana invariably turns me towards other points of stimulation. The application of mind towards the asana becomes a struggle not to be thrown off. But this is not the only way of focusing the mind.

Exercises of Attention

When you look across the range of asanas it is obvious that different asanas require different qualities of application. The application to sustain a forward bend is far different from arm balancings for example. In order to work across the range of asanas I must become flexible in my style of application. I must be able to choose between action and stillness (restraint). I have to practice the different responses necessary to each asana and in so doing make the mind flexible to whatever conditions it encounters.

Let me suggest 3 exercises of Attention to undertake within your practice.

1 Immersion - Concentrating on one point in an asana.

To look without flinching or wavering in your intent upon the predominant sensation of the asana. This is dispassionate concentration. For example: the strong stretch of the inner hamstring in Trikonasana. It is remarkably difficult to look at sensation directly – the mind jumps in and judges it; too strong, too hot, I don't like it etc. It is only when dispassionate observation is developed that this becomes possible. Watch closely how your attention interacts with the sensation – it weaves around it and wont be still.

2 Directing Attention - Concentrating on a chosen point within the asana.

This is usually a subtle point. In so doing it requires that the mind not to be drawn towards the strongest sensation. An act of restraint. For example: The stretch of the inner heel in Sirsasana when the predominant sensations exist in the neck, shoulders and arms or when discomfort pulls the attention towards obsession with a difficult sensation. Just as we have no choice over what sounds we hear, it is also possible that we stop hearing sounds when we are engrossed in something that captures our attention. This is a practice of engaging intimately so that all your perception goes to the chosen point.

3 Broad Attention - Concentrating on no points in an asana.

Not to be drawn towards nagging or unrelenting sensation - broad attention. Where the mind is held in broad attention - neither pulled towards or pushed away by experience. For example: the whole experience of paschimottanasana - both bodily, mentally and emotionally. This could be most alike "listening" where you hear what the asana has to say. As we develop greater concentration through practice the mind naturally focuses in the asanas. This attention to detail itself becomes a trap where we become consumed by the intricacy of the experience. Broad attention is where we listen to the asana.

Each of the 3 exercises mentioned above require a different quality of application. At first you may find yourself strong in one and yet unable to sustain the others. Or, alternatively, you find that you can only apply yourself in one way in a particular pose. If this is the case you have become stuck and inflexible in your approach and have no exercise of choice.

Within practice, shifting the point of attention to focus attention at will is an act of practice and renunciation where the mind is free to choose. When the mind is free to choose in this way it is not driven by desire or aversion and yet choice has become balanced; not an exercise of sensual pursuit. Just as asanas are tools to access the body the practices of attention make the mind flexible so that it becomes a tool to understand and reconcile our experience of the world. When we practice we should apply the twin pillars to all our actions.

If abhyasa and vairagya are assiduously observed, restraint of the mind becomes possible much more quickly. Then, one may explore what is beyond the mind, and taste the nectar of immortality, soul realisation. Temptations neither daunt nor haunt one who has this intensity of heart in practice and renunciation. If practice is slowed down, then the search for soul realisation becomes clogged and bound in the wheel of time."⁵

⁵ Light on yoga sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons 2002, p17