

In attempting to make sense of what we see when observing someone's practice of asana it is essential to understand something of how yoga views the relationship between the general and the particular. Or in other words, how specific actions (such as an asana) reflect a greater principle.

How is it that the detail that a teacher applies to the asana comes to have a greater effect than this same detail implies? Instructions can be used to refine alignment but they do much more.

Yoga recognises that our actions are not independent or isolated from one another. Past experience informs and guides our actions and these same actions contain motive (both fears and desires) often unseen by us. A practitioner aims to study the gross actions and through this study, to uncover the subtle content of our actions. Still further, to study the forces which propel us in our lives.

Sounds grand? It is an ambitious undertaking.

The Gunas

Patanjali indicates that in many ways we are expressions of nature. We are born, we live, and we die. Just as nature is made up of particles subject to constant change, so too, are we. The three forces of nature namely, density (tamas), vibrancy (rajas) and luminosity (satva) can be seen in all objects. Humanity itself has an endless expression of these forces in the diversity of individuals. In turn, each of us is an expression of either more or less of these 3 forces. Some heavier, some lighter, some more inclined to action or to stillness etc. We come from nature and we will return to nature. Indian thought names the 3 forces of nature as the Gunas.

In his book *Light on Life* BKS Iyengar notes

'Yoga sees the origin of nature as a root. In Sanskrit it calls it root nature, (mula prakrti). Within that root, as we saw earlier, exist certain unstable but creative propensities called the qualities of nature, the three guna: mass or inertia (tamas), dynamism or vibrancy (rajas), and luminosity and serenity (sattva). In the root of nature, they are balanced and in equal proportions. They exist only as a potential. They do, however, partake of nature's enduring characteristic. They are unstable.

They shift. It is their destiny to fidget and form. And form they do, but gradually. The subtle precedes the gross, or as we would say, the invisible comes before the visible. Cosmic intelligence (mahat), which exists in all of us, is the first manifestation of the invisible. From cosmic intelligence sprout cosmic energy (prana) and consciousness (citta), and from these devolves ego (ahamkara) or the sense of self. From the one root comes duality (which is the ability to separate), from duality comes vibration (which is the pulse of life beginning), from vibration comes invisible manifestation, and from the invisible comes the visible in all its glorious and horrendous diversity and multiplicity. This end product is what we take the world to be our playground, our paradise, or our hell and our prison. If we misapprehend nature, take it at face value, through ignorance (avidya), then it is our prison, The path modern science has taken to escape from the prison is analytical. Science dissects, whether it be frogs, human bodies, or atoms, It seeks truth in intrinsic minutiae. But if you take a watch to bits, you may understand how it works. However, you will no longer be able to tell the time. Yoga also dissects ego, mind, and intelligence, for example but it is not only analytical. It is synthetic too, or integrationist.¹

Once we acknowledge that whilst we exist as individuals we are also expressions of nature – subject to change, we can examine the gross actions as expressions of a more subtle counterpart. The development of each of us into individuals is termed evolution; we evolve out of the forces of nature. Conversely, Yoga utilises the same pathway to study mind and consciousness. This reverse process is termed the pathway of Involution.

¹ *Light on Life* by BKS Iyengar, Rhodale press 2005

Involution

In our system of Practice (Iyengar's method) a beginner is made to connect one part of the body to another, so too body and breath, and mind with body as a further extension. Thus the mind is brought to the same extension as the body. BKS Iyengar writes

'Asana means posture, which is the art of positioning the body as a whole with a physical, mental and spiritual attitude. Posture has two aspects, namely posing and reposing. Posing means action. Pose is assuming a fixed position of limbs and body as represented by the particular asana being performed. Reposing means reflection on the pose. The pose is re-thought and readjusted so that the various limbs and parts of the body are positioned in their places in a proper order and feel rested and soothed, and the mind experiences the tranquillity and calmness of bones, joints, muscles, fibres and cells.

By reflecting on which part of the body is working, which part of the mind is working, and which part of the body has not been penetrated by the mind, we bring the mind to the same extension as the body. As the body is contracted or extended, so the intelligence is contracted or extended to reach every part of the body. This is what is known as reposing; this is sensitivity. When this sensitivity is in touch equally with the body, the mind and the soul, we are in a state of contemplation or meditation which is known as asana. The dualities between body and mind, mind and soul, are vanquished or destroyed.²

It is not merely an act of getting the asanas right with correct alignment but a process of integration or unification.

This process is significant for us as practitioners. Consider table 9³ in Iyengar's commentary of the Yoga Sutras (below) on the Evolution and Involution of Prakrti. What we see as the arrows descend is the evolution of the forces of nature described earlier.

If however we use our practice of specific asanas as a means to look inwards and as a potential pathway.

The Karmendriyas (numbers 7-9 in the table) are our most visible expression in the world. What we do and say – our organs of action. They can be studied and refined. An asana practice is an excellent vehicle for this exploration.

The jnanendriyas (10-14) are our senses of perception⁴. All gross actions (in the karmendriyas) have their subtle counterpart in the senses. When we practice in the body we can observe the involvement of the Jnanendriyas.

This leads us to mind (manas – number 4 in the table above). Mind is classed as a sense organ⁵. Mind can function as a controller but can be used to perceive.

Manas is one aspect of our consciousness. In our culture, we use the term mind to indicate all the functions of the conscious state and yet yoga views manas as but one of three components of our consciousness (Citta – number 3 in the table). The three constituents of Citta are Manas (mind), Ahamkara (I'ness), and Buddhi (intelligence).

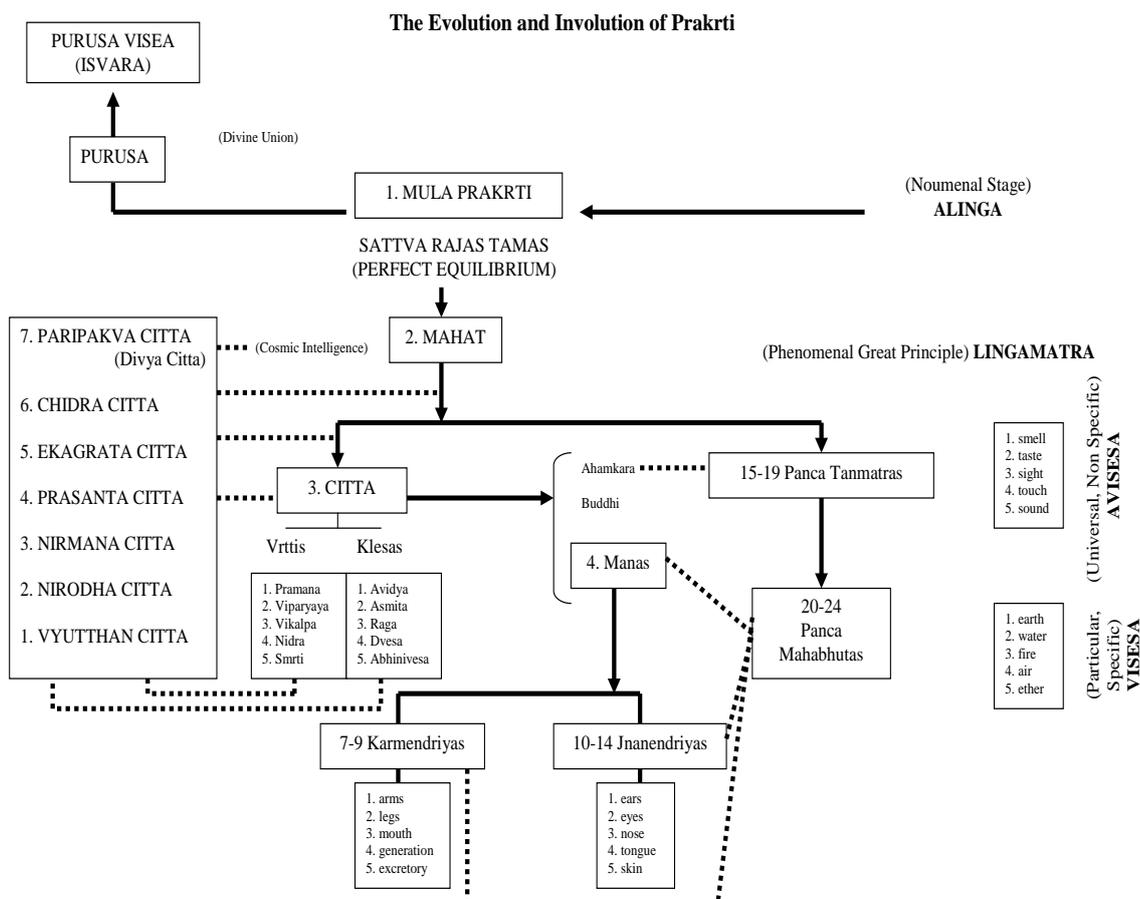
² Tree of Yoga by BKS Iyengar. chapter Depth of asana. Further reading on this topic - Article 'Mastering a state of being' by Alan Goode www.yogamandir.com.au

³ 'Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali' by BKS Iyengar, Thorsons 2002, pages 232-233

⁴ Article 'The influence of the senses' by Alan Goode, www.yogamandir.com.au

⁵ 'Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali' by BKS Iyengar, Thorsons 2002, page 65

Table 9



The pathway indicated here posits the view that should we focus our efforts to the very substantial arena of the body in asana (karmendriyas) we will encounter the Jnanendriyas. Just as the senses interact, Manas interweaves with an asana. Manas can be both observed and adjusted. Our physical actions have a subtle counterpart.

A very real link exists between the practice of asana as a means to study consciousness⁶

In the same table Iyengar places the vrttis and klesas directly below Citta (number 3). The movements (vrttis) and the Klesas (afflictions) are felt in the consciousness and can too be studied. If we have an aim to still the movements in the consciousness we must come to know their source.

Iyengar's method is nothing other than an abhyasa – a long uninterrupted practice into a chosen subject. It aims to study the movements and modifications in the consciousness and to examine the underlying forces that propel us in our lives.

'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..

⁶ Article 'Yoga: a study in consciousness' by Alan Goode www.yogamandir.com.au

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'.⁷

The very nature of an abhyasa moves us beyond our enthusiasm for practice. A practice held in the excitements on offer will fade over time. If however, the sadhaka continues, what can develop is a practice which begins to illuminate through insight. We experience the constituents of Citta through the practice and can identify the vrttis and klesas. This is not incidental to Gurujis method.

Iyengar's Abhyasa is not merely focussed upon the development of the asana but aims to follow the involuntary pathway as a means to identify and examine citta. A study of citta unearths the vrttis and the klesas. In this way justly and correctly aligns his practice with Patanjali. It is not a new Yoga but a means to achieve Yoga.

'To the new student or non-practitioner of yoga a relentless pursuit of perfection in asana may seem pointless. To advanced students, a teacher teaches a whole asana in relationship to what is happening in a single action... ... Asanas act as bridges to unite the body with the mind, and the mind with the soul. They lift the sadhaka from the clutches of afflictions and lead him towards disciplined freedom. They help to transform him by guiding his consciousness away from the body towards awareness of the soul.

Through asana, the sadhaka comes to know and fully realize the finite body, and merge it with the infinite - the soul. Then there is neither the known nor the unknown and only then does the asana exist wholly. This is the essence of a perfect asana'.⁸

⁷ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali' by BKS Iyengar, Thorsons 2002, page 16

⁸ Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. By BKS Iyengar, Thorsons, 2002, p 31