

What is the role of self-knowledge in yoga?

What is self-knowledge—is it being more aware of oneself, more confident, more assertive?

More self-absorbed? Self-obsessed?

Are we becoming more ourselves or less ourselves?

What is the transformation idea in yoga?

To explore these ideas I'd like to observe a particular quality that exists in a practice. Each day we enter the practice—working at, and refining these movements called asanas. Learning to balance in handstand, stay longer in headstand, but why? For what purpose?

Let us look at this question of refinement in terms of learning. If we study ourselves at the point of the act (doing the asana), if we apply ourselves on the doing (trying to achieve the pose), we use (deletion) skills we already have in our attempt to know the pose. But poses are varied and complex, so that whilst some poses will yield to the skills we have developed throughout our life to date we will, inevitably, encounter asanas which need not only new movements of the body, but also, importantly, new qualities of application (as previously discussed in the article 'Reshaping Attitudes in Asana'). As we acquire greater skill and proficiency in what we are capable of, paradoxically we move further into areas we are not competent in.

Yoga thus becomes a study of what we *don't know* through the encounter with the body in asana. In this arena where perception must be clear and sharp, the yogi should be acutely aware of their own personality and habits. There is a need for self-knowledge. Without this level of awareness, the practitioner uses past responses (habits) and skills with ever diminishing results. New skills and ways of acting and responding become essential throughout the yogi's life. Yoga is the art of discovery.

Self-Knowledge

So what is self-knowledge in this context?

Whenever we encounter something new—an experience or situation—we rely on the sum of our past experiences and impressions to make assessments and draw conclusions. From these conclusions we respond. However, if all our actions were guided solely by these past situations, nothing new could enter our realm of experience. At this point the world commences to shrink. An example is when we assume someone new we meet to be the same as someone we have encountered previously, we assume they will respond the same way, perhaps because of similar looks or characteristics. Yet this may be far from the case. At times like these a broader perspective is required to contextualise the situation. Patterns of thought, and assumptions about the world are inevitable, and yet we act from these assumptions without question, and mostly without recognition of our prejudices. Our view of the world is formed through these sets of values, and this 'horizon of meaning' becomes a set of boundaries imposed on possibility. An example of this is when we expect our practice to provide a specific experience, or to create a particular outcome, or mental state. We may practice to alleviate stress, reduce back pain, focus more, etc. The practice may achieve these aims, but because of the way we hold to these set, or preconceived images of our practice, we may become blind to other qualities contained within it. The confirmation of the experience—the positive benefits felt—disables the potential broadening of inquiry because of the way it fulfils the mind's expectations. Recognizing these self-imposed boundaries is a form of self-knowledge. Part of the role of a practice is to encounter these assumptions, and to recognise their influence on what we do and the results which follow—we observe the way we act in asana and the results within our body, mind and emotional state. The result is a form of knowledge, and yet it is not necessarily the kind of knowledge, or information which can be traded or described or used by others. A practice thus entails the act of recognizing our own traits of mind, and not allowing them to them override our judgment. This can only be done when we have observed these traits carefully, and become intimate with their influence. We need to be regularly exposed, through a practice, to our habits and assumptions. This is by no means a methodology of control or eradication,

whereby we eliminate our personality, instead, it is more the exposure to the uncertainty of our humanity. There is a need to be both free of past assumptions, and yet still be able to build and draw on the collective experiences we have developed. Donna Holleman describes this in her book, *Dancing the Body of Light*, in the following way:

The technique of the asanas with its precision is one aspect of practicing yoga, but if this becomes the only aspect, then yoga loses half of its meaning. The other half is the poetic side, where the body loses its sharp division line between it and the surrounding space, and the asana becomes part of the unified field, the continuum of space/time in which we all have our being. Thus, finding the balance between precision and flow; is to go beyond the body -mind split and again integrate yoga and ourselves into an un-fragmented whole.

Practicing yoga, hence, means that the poses and the breathing exercises are done with a certain mental attitude in which mind and body are one, not two, and in which the body and the poses are not something imposed on the surrounding space, but in which both the body and the asanas are flowing events, dynamic happenings in space/time, expressions of a fluid mind which does not have a fixed position that has to be defended at all cost. A mind that does not have a fence around it, but has a boundless curiosity to explore the Universe at large as well the personal universe that each one of us carries along.

This wholeness she describes is not always pleasant or palatable—it may contain a mix of clarity (insight) and fear, for example. Having no ‘fixed position’ refers not to the absence of a history, but to the freedom derived from not defending a set of assumptions or beliefs.

More self-absorbed? Self-obsessed?

If we are to draw all our values from those around us, our sense of self becomes clouded and confused, and so too our senses become heightened to capture as many of these external inputs as possible. Our values become attached to those around us. When we practice with an attitude of listening to our bodies and experiencing the mind and emotions, we become less attuned to external measurement, and orientate ourselves to a more internalised state. We become more self-absorbed in terms of being more comfortable within ourselves, and being able to confidently exist there.

Self-obsession on the other hand, exists when an individual needs to repeat the same ‘internal conversations’ continually, as an attempt to hold together a particular internal state or sense of interiority. Pratyahara (the fifth limb of yoga) is the term used to describe the internalising of the senses, whereby the senses lose their outward orientation and become attuned to the internal environment. Whilst this state is often regarded as something to practice, it can also happen as the result of a practice that is absorbed in what it is doing. It’s as if the room dissolves when we practice with absorption and concentration.

More or Less Ourselves

Are we becoming more ourselves or less ourselves when we practice?

Many people commence yoga out of a desire to improve themselves, to change habits, or to change into someone else. In following the framework mentioned above it becomes impossible to avoid oneself. Far from changing into someone more likeable or more beautiful, we are likely to encounter more of our inabilities through, for example, asanas we find difficult, painful sensations in the body, or emotional challenges. We are exposed to the unknown within us, to uncertainty. The idea of changing into someone different is largely driven by a desire to escape from old patterns, or the desire for something new. The attraction of change is driven by either fear or desire and is thus ultimately unworkable, because the motivations themselves are confusing. As we proceed in a personal practice, we peel away social layers, or those parts of ourselves presented to the world, and the images we project. Ideas we hold about ourselves are either refuted or confirmed in this private space, and through this process we become more ourselves.

It is important to distinguish the difference here between classes and practice. Classes are an avenue for learning, for broadening one’s technique, for being exposed to new ways of working and to new qualities of mind, and yet they can never be a replacement for a personal practice. While students find home practice difficult, often because they assume a lack of discipline or a lack of concentration on their own part, I consider the difficulties surrounding the formation of a personal practice to exist more in these subtle realms already outlined—one’s

background assumptions and intentions—rather than in the more obvious attributes, such as self-discipline. These subtle realms are also the ones in which yoga is of greatest value. But, if we are to change, to transform, how does this take place?

Transformation

What is the transformation idea in Yoga – transformed into what from what?

Yoga is often described in terms of an unfolding. The ‘unfolding’ of a practice refers to a learning by doing, rather than an imposition of asanas on the body, or the holding to a doctrine. Experimental and clarifying, it does not expect the practitioner to hold set beliefs. Yoga can thus be seen as a body of experience, not an ideology. In the *History of Yoga*, Vivian Worthington claims that,

One of the difficulties of tracing a history of yoga has been that by its nature it leaves nothing behind except myths and legends of miraculous powers possessed by some of the more accomplished practitioners of the art. Only in the last thousand years or so have efforts been made to provide it with intellectual content such as would elevate it to the status of philosophy in its own right. The attempts have not been successful because yoga is not an intellectual activity. So in India it has tended to run in harness with the Samkhya philosophy, of which more later. Yoga has in fact tended all along to be anti-intellectual, even anti-religious. To be true to itself it must ever stand close to the spontaneous fount of human creativity. It is more intuitive than reasonable, more experimental than formalistic, more other-worldly than of this world, and more akin to art than to science.

So yoga, as a creative act, is the discovery and exploration of the inner world through inquiry and observation, not in order to obliterate the past but not to be constrained by it either. We transform and develop throughout a practice via discovery and through our failures, in order to hold opinions based on clarification rather than conjecture. Truth is not held or won, but is observed day to day—an act in the present.

Samskaras

The term Samskara (past impressions) refers to the way the past is carried by us and shapes our present, and can be seen in the way we hold our bodies, the way we think, the way we feel; our habits and history formed and reformed in our day to day lives. Whether conscious or sublimated, these impressions colour our outlook on the world. Likes and dislikes, fears and desires are interwoven in the fabric of all our actions. Just as when we listen to a familiar piece of music, nuances and subtlety gradually come to light as we commence to hear the underlying weave in the background; we uncover greater understanding through intimacy with the piece. Similarly, all our actions have attributes connected to the *intention* behind the action. This is the ‘background’ in asana. Through the repetition of asana work we observe and uncover these influences. Our desire to further a forward bend, for example, may cause us to exert greater effort. Greater effort or force causes the muscle to trigger and contract. Thus, not only is the asana less effective, but we are also in the contradictory position of trying to go further whilst simultaneously having to suppress or ignore the intensity of sensation aroused in order to achieve the perceived aim. We are desiring and rejecting at the same moment. An action, then, is not one-dimensional and may mean different things in different situations, or at different times. Samskaras is the term used to describe the way our actions have a residue which carry over long after the event is finished. These imprints propel us to further action through craving, desire, fear and aversion. A yogi attempts to cleanse their actions of mixed messages and intentions so that their actions become free of generating future imprints. Pure action. Viewed therapeutically, a yoga practice can be seen as an act of re-encountering, or reliving a past event so as to disempower the way it is currently held within the individual. It provides an opportunity to change our relationship to that event, to free us from it, to let go of the past. Thus, the past event has less power over us because it becomes known, or familiar.

Alternatively, when we encounter the way our past is currently held within us, we open the potential to reinscribe the past. In re-entering the imprints stored within the body, we reencounter those signifiers of the past, and thus open the possibility of reshaping them. In this sense, then, yoga is not just therapy (interpreting an event from the past), but has the potential to free us of and reform the past. It can become a forum, arguably, in which to rewrite



the past —or, perhaps more particularly, the way it shapes us—by entering into the way it is currently held within us. We can enter the way the past is with us moment to moment in our daily activities.

Transformation in yoga could be seen, then, as the ability to transcend the way we fix the past within us—the way in which we hold to this fixed point for the certainty of who we are now. Yoga isn't simply repetition or recurrence of the same thing over and over again, but is a transformation of the past and, furthermore, a freeing of the present to become the past. A practice requires balance between action in the current moment and reflection on, and acknowledgment of, the past. It involves both remembering and, importantly, forgetting the past in order to act. Being intimate with the way the mind shapes things—its 'conversation'—is therefore essential.

Ultimately self-knowledge is not a codified, predetermined set of responses to a given situation, but is the freedom to make responses through a clarity of attention—it involves being as fully present to the experience as possible.