

Most learning is an act of cognition – that is, an act of understanding something initially through explanation; an act of comprehension; an act of mind. Access to and proficiency in the task are then developed through application of the principles described to achieve fluency. The important thing to note in this sequence of learning is the starting point of explanation, a process of mind. Learning is undertaken through the process of understanding what the teacher has said. It therefore involves rationalisations and the vocabulary of language. It is also limited by these same factors. Communication becomes possible by rendering the activity into something that can be recognised by the student. By the same process it implies that if something is not explainable it is not understandable. If something is not rational it is not cognisable. In this article I would like to explore a different method of absorbing knowledge – Imprinting.

Imprinting is the act of placing a set of images in the storehouse of our impressions. It is to develop a background on which we draw each time we practice. It does not necessarily require comprehension in order to proceed and often times it defies comprehension initially until it is fully integrated.

For us to discuss Imprinting we must examine memory.

Memory is the way we handle an impression. However, memory is not the impression itself. We assume that when we remember something that we cast our mind back and look at the image of what happened. We assume that the memory is fixed and the act of remembering somewhat akin to reviewing a video library of our past experiences. Yet, in reality, it is clear that remembering is not a fixed process. We remember different aspects of an experience at different times and by mulling something over again and again we can even shape the way we remember the event. The event becomes what we remember. This observation recognises the role that our mind plays in memory. We bring the event into our frontal brain to recollect it. In effect, we get the impression out of its store and turn it over in our mind. Memory recreates the event and memory reshapes the event each time we handle it. For example, memories of distant events do not merely fade in clarity but aspects often remerge in crystal clarity as we re-experience the event.

If we follow this thread then, what do we draw upon when we remember something? Any experience is held in the body, in the emotions and in the mind. These impressions sit beyond our memory and are what we reach into to touch the experience of the event now passed. This would explain why our memories are not devoid of emotion. In practical terms, when a student does Trikonasana, for example, that student draws on their mental image of the way the asana looks, their past experience of the asana, the points they have been taught, the energetics, how it is evoked, its associations. These all play a part in shaping the asana. It is not a simple act of reproduction. Individual students experience the same asana differently depending on how they hold the image of the asana within their mind's eye, the way that individual understands and interprets what they were told. When learning, the teacher does more than instruct the asana. The teacher sets an image of what to aim for within the asana.

BKS Iyengar comments on the way memory should be used in the practice of asana in the following text:

When memory is completely cleansed and purified, mind too is purified. Both cease to function as distinct entities; a no-mind state is experienced, and consciousness alone manifests itself, shining unblemished without reflection of external objects. This is called *nirvitarka samapatti*.

Memory is the recollection of past thoughts and experiences. It is the storehouse of past impressions. Its knowledge is reflected knowledge. The *sadhaka* should be aware that memory has tremendous impact on intelligence. By perseverance in yoga practices and persistent self-discipline, new experiences surface. These new experiences, free from the memories of the past, are fresh, direct and subjective; they expunge what is remembered. Then memory ceases to function as a separate entity. It either merges with consciousness or

takes a back seat, giving predominance to new experiences and bringing clarity in intelligence. For the average person memory is a past mind. For the enlightened man, memory is a present mind. As memory is purified, intelligence becomes illuminative and moves closer to the seer, losing its identity. This is *nirvitarka samapatti*. Even for the unripe mind, there is a right and a wrong use of memory. It is not for recollecting pleasure, but for establishing a fund of experience as a basis for further correct action and perception.

In *asana*, for example, we start with trial and error. The fruits of these experiments are graded by the discriminating intelligence and stored in the memory. As we progress, trial and error decreases, and correct perception increases. So memory provides foresight against error. In the headstand, for example, something that usually goes wrong is that the upper arm shortens. Memory warns us, 'be aware before it happens'. Discriminating experiment awakens consciousness. Awareness, with discrimination and memory, breaks down bad habits, which are repeated actions based on wrong perception, and replaces them with their opposite. In this process the brain must be creative, not mechanical. The mechanical brain questions only the external phenomena, bringing objective knowledge. The creative brain calls into question the inner and outer, bringing subjective and spiritual knowledge. In *asana* understanding begins, with the inner skin; in *pranayama*, with the inner membrane of the nose. These are the starting points of the spiritual quest in *asana* and *pranayama*.<sup>1</sup>

It is clearly stated in this passage that memory should not be used for the recreation of past experiences. It could be said that we normally go with the memory and are unavailable to the present. If memory is cleansed and purified by new experience, it does not mean that we no longer remember but it means that we do not merely recreate old experiences. Memory is used to discriminate between that which is known and what we have not experienced before. Memory effectively helps us identify what is known so that subtle shifts of new experience can be identified. The discriminative aspect of the consciousness named Buddhi is cultivated.

Patanjali refers to *citta* (consciousness) as being composed of three aspects:

- Manas – mind. That which oscillates, samples experience and is volatile.
- Ahamkhara – 'I'ness or ego.
- Buddhi – intelligence. The capacity to differentiate and make choices. Intelligence is the means by which we develop discrimination.

In the passage Iyengar states that 'discriminating experiment awakens consciousness'. By this he refers to a set of practice enquiries conducted by the *sadhaka* (student) used to cultivate the discriminative faculty of the consciousness (Buddhi) and thereby awaken consciousness in an area of the body. When Buddhi is developed, Manas becomes stable and 'I'ness diminishes. We develop the capacity to see clearly without the colourisation of ego or the fluctuating mind.

Iyengar again in sutra 1.44:

... In *nirvicara samapatti*, the *sadhaka* experiences a state without verbal deliberation. All the subtle objects reflected in *savicara* are extinguished. He is free from memory, free from past experiences, devoid of all past impressions. This new state of contemplation is without cause and effect, place or time. The inexpressible states of pure bliss (*ananda*) and pure self (*sasmita*) rise to the surface and are experienced by the *sadhaka* (see 1.41).<sup>2</sup>

A state of non verbal deliberation is where there is no internal dialogue. The degree to which we normally follow our inner conversation is astonishing. When engaged with talking the world to ourselves we are not present to the experience directly because we are more involved with the interpretation of what is happening. We get caught into what we think is happening, will happen or did happen. This is an essential step in the development of a practice. It involves moving beyond explanations and talking ourselves through asanas to a point where the asana is observed and contemplated.

<sup>1</sup> BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, HarperCollins, London, 1993, p. 89-90

<sup>2</sup> BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, HarperCollins, London, 1993, p. 91

Iyengar tells us that memory can also be used to clarify and discern. Memory can show us what is the same, what is different and what is new. Memory can be the basis of fresh experience; not merely the repetition of our past. As a methodology, it is an avenue to orientate ourselves within the subtle internal world so that we are able to identify the more repetitious patterns of thought and experience, and to clarify perception.

## **Residual Impressions – Samskaras**

Throughout our lives we experience reactions that are disproportionate to a situation or event. Emotions flare or trigger as a result of our association with past experiences if the current situation bears similarities. Each act in daily life leaves an imprint that influences the next act. Each practice forms the imprint for the following practice. If our experience is continually negative then the cumulative experience is negative. I am not speaking of positive and negative feedback in this instance; encouragement or discouragement. More important than these affirmations of good or bad is whether the experience can be read and built upon. Does the experience clarify perception or merely produce more thought? What is the residual impression? These imprints are not to be mistaken for perfecting the form of the asana.

The term 'samskara' (past impressions) refers to the way the past is carried by us and shapes our present. It 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.

BKS Iyengar writes:

### **Samskaras**

Depending on their provenance, the fruits of actions may either tie us to lust, anger and greed, or turn us towards the spiritual quest. These residual impressions are called Samskaras: they build the cycles of our existence. And decide the station, time and place of our birth. The yogi's actions, being pure leave no impressions and excite no reactions, and are therefore free from residual impressions.

### **Desires and impressions**

Desires and knowledge derived from memory and residual impressions, exist eternally. They are as much a part of our being as is the will to cling to life. In a perfect yogis life, desires and impressions have an end; when the mechanism of cause and effect is disconnected by pure, motiveless action, the yogi transcends the world of duality and desires and attachment wither and fall away.<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, it is important to recognise that the quality of our actions is as important as the outcome of each act as all actions leave residual impressions. It is not merely an act of getting the asana in correct alignment. It is equally important to resolve the asana. Resolve ones motive in the asana. This resolution is the component that allows us to stay in the asana. It is the balance between body, mind and breath, which produces a crystal like clarity in the consciousness (citta).

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<sup>3</sup> BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, HarperCollins, London, 1993, p. 37

The teacher directs the student in the quality, the tone of the action, as much as the technique. It is a difficult thing to convey and is the inexplicable component of teaching where an asana is transmitted from teacher to student. By way of example: a teacher through their explanations and demonstrations, through adjustments and variations of each asana, will develop an understanding of the asana within the student. Explanation may not always be the best method as more words often generate more thought. It may be better to show an asana, have the student perform and then adjust the asana. This non-verbal form of learning is valuable because it is not constrained by words. The student is trained to know the asana physically, intellectually, energetically, emotionally, so that the imprint of the experience is clear and not clouded or cluttered by too many variables. The imprint sits behind the conscious mind.

Metaphor is often used in language to convey concepts that are difficult to grasp. Descriptions in themselves tend to be mechanistic and flatten the landscape of experience. Descriptions are more inclined to name and to lay claim to certainty. This certainty is unsustainable in the realm of consciousness. The associative power of image is drawn to the service of expanding the landscape of consciousness. To become aware of something does not require descriptions or knowing through naming. Metaphor is textural and evocative. It puts the experience in context. It locates the current action in relation to other experiences and stamps the action with an imprint. Teachers are often driven to reach for metaphor to convey experiences that are not held in language. Where descriptions falter, metaphor can define a location or qualitative aspect. More than tell the student what to do or what to find, metaphor can be used to indicate how to look or how to be in oneself.

So what then of Imprinting? Imprinting is the act of placing a set of images or experiences in the storehouse of our impressions. This body of experience allows us to access something greater than the stretches and breathing exercises. These practices are the vehicle by which we experience directly and clarify our perception.

Memory is what we draw upon to commence, but if we go on memory alone we merely recreate what is already known, what has been done. Iyengar's method is to bring the student into the moment through a precise set of instructions, acted upon immediately. He describes it in the passage below:

‘The conjunction of effort, concentration and balance in asana forces us to live intensely in the present moment, a rare experience in modern life. This actuality, or being in the present, has both a strengthening and a cleansing effect: physically in the rejection of disease, mentally by ridding our mind of stagnated thoughts or prejudices; and, on a very high level where perception and action become one, by teaching us instantaneous correct action; that is to say, action which does not produce reaction. On that level we may also expunge the residual effects of past actions.

The three origins of pain are eradicated by asana as we progress from clear vision through right thinking to correct action.’<sup>4</sup>

Yoga is the study of cause and effect – the quality of an act and its residue. A practice of asana can provide the means to undertake this study, to unify our actions and cleanse them of residual impressions. It is often the case that a student becomes entranced with the asana sensations because the practice makes them feel real and solid. The practice gives them a sense of reality and substance; grounding and clarifying. Ultimately, however, Yoga aims to undertake actions that do not propel us to further action, actions that are devoid of unspoken desires and fears, and actions that are devoid of past and future.

From the asana comes experience, from experience comes knowledge, can knowledge be experienced directly, unencumbered by thought.

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<sup>4</sup> BKS Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, HarperCollins, London, 1993, p. 28-29