

YOGA AND ALIGNMENT

FROM THE UPANISHADS TO B.K.S. IYENGAR



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CHAPTER FOUR

THE TEMPLE OF THE BODY

Though the methods of working with the body in yoga have varied greatly, it is understood as being a vital part of spiritual transformation. Within the yoga paradigm, no bypass of the body is allowed, and energetic training is considered a prerequisite for both health and progressive spiritualization. Though the texts offer different maps of the body's inner anatomy, they all accept the existence of a subtle life-force energy.

The association of life with breath and breath with the divine offers a metaphor of the body as a temple for the spirit. The Sanskrit term used for this association is *prana*, which connects life-breath and divinity. This spiritual anchoring is an essential aspect of embodied practice. As Iyengar (2012) writes, "without a body, it is impossible to see God. The body has to undergo some training in order to be an effectual help to reach the highest goal: *Atma Darshana* (self-realization). For that you need a sound and strong body" (51). From this perspective, the spirit (*atman*) is not found outside normal life, not even outside the body. Instead, the realization of the divine lies behind everyday experience and embodied practice.

The pioneering work of B.K.S. Iyengar

In contemporary yoga culture, posture practice and alignment are often associated with seeking integral balance and symmetry of form in the individual poses. This is accomplished partly by paying careful attention to the dual energies within the body. Though a tapestry of energy channels exist, the two main channels to be harmonized are those of the solar and lunar channels. As gatekeepers to the main spiritual channel the *sushumna*, their balancing is of primary importance. In fact, to consciously cultivate and attune the body to flow according to its inherent patterns of subtle energy is part and parcel of a balanced posture practice.

Iyengar pioneered a radically new way of looking at alignment from the perspective of the physical body, and made posture practice (*asana*) the entry point to learn about energetic cultivation. He brought methods such as work with points, sequencing and timing into posture practice to bring about an embodied form of concentration and interiorization. Also, he used a great variety of supportive props to bring about a tailored approach to each person.

The system developed by Iyengar built on the teachings of his guru Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, who was determined that yoga should be taught to householders. Krishnamacharya developed practices suited to those living in the world and pioneered an approach that was compatible with day-to-day life. Eventually, he took the radical step of teaching non-Indians and women, realizing that the practices would be valuable for all regardless of cultural background or gender.

As a young man, Iyengar was not considered a promising student. Initially he experienced illness and physical weakness but through determination

and devotion, he worked through the blocks in his own practice and then was able to engage with the challenges of others with attention and compassion. From his earliest days of teaching, he was concerned with adapting practices to the individual student. He describes imitating a student's problems in order to find out how he could best correct and guide them back to a natural balance. In this way he attempted to awaken the body's own intelligence.

In developing a whole therapeutic approach to yoga, Iyengar never lost sight of the grounding of yoga in the spiritual tradition. In his book *Light on Yoga* (2005), he describes the yoga system as a paradigm in which "the subtle precedes the gross, or the spirit precedes matter" (11). From this perspective, subtle breath is one of the tools we possess for stilling the body-mind. Awareness of breath is an integrated part of posture practice, and without it the poses lack vitality.

For Iyengar, alignment was the spirit behind any work with postures and the main principle behind any technique used. Some sequences of yoga postures were meant to bring deep therapeutic effects, whereas others were used to shift mental states in a positive direction. A technique such as timing, where the practitioner stays in certain poses longer than in others, develops not only endurance and resilience, but also the subtle gifts of quietude and inner rest. The practice of restorative poses is an example of a practice where calming the nervous system and the mind are emphasized. Through these varied practice methods, Iyengar taught a vital kind of embodied concentration and mindfulness, as well as an attitude of non-violence (*ahimsa*).

His approach is based on the understanding that the subtle body comes to life when stillness and repose are found in the postures. Yoga can be compared to bird watching where the most exquisite things happen when we learn to be attentive, present and still. As Iyengar (2012) writes:

While doing the postures, your mind should be in half-consciousness, which does not mean sleep. It means silence, emptiness, space, which can then be filled with an acute awareness of the sensations given by the posture. You watch yourself from inside. It is a full silence. (67)

The emphasis is on being an agent of one's healing rather than a victim of the many issues that confront the body.

Iyengar also addresses mood-states and habits; *asanas* are used to bring a positive change and to lift the vibration of the energy (*prana*) of the student. He insisted that yoga poses were to be adapted to the individual and not the other way around, and that props could aid in finding poise in the poses.

The spine as energetic centre

Classical yoga scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* agree that it is essential to cultivate a strong and upright spine so that the *prana*, or vital energy, can flow without blockages, as well as enliven the nerves and *chakra* system. The spine is our core physically, mentally and spiritually. In *Awakening the Spine* (2019), Vanda Scaravelli refers to the song of the body that comes to life when we recognize our spine as the energetic core of the practice. This song can only be heard if we listen to the subtle movements of the spine (26).

In many yoga texts, the health of the spine is understood as being the foundation of good posture and the instrument for the enlivening of spiritual energy in the body. The *Vastasutra Upanishad* emphasizes that placing the limbs and spine along certain symmetrical lines is like knowledge of the divine. In Iyengar's method, the symmetry between the use of limbs and the awakening of the spine is taken to new dimensions.

Though Scaravelli emphasizes the flexibility of the spine, the scriptures tend to emphasize stability over fluidity, as it is ultimately the delicate dance and union of the two. Sutra 11.46 states that "*sthira sukham asanam*," meaning that only the careful balancing of stability and ease can bring about harmonious posture. As Iyengar (1991) writes:

Whatever asana is performed it should be done with a feeling of firmness, steadiness and endurance in the body, goodwill in the intelligence of the head, and awareness and delight in the intelligence of the heart. This is how each asana should be understood, practiced and experienced. Performance of the asana should be nourishing and illuminative. (157)

This approach ensures that the practitioner does not become complacent and is regularly moved beyond their comfort zone.

Rigidity also is not helpful as it shuts down the inner energy and destroys joy in the practice. Perhaps more importantly, the serenity and quietude of yoga may get lost. Anyone who has immersed themselves in *asana* practice will know how the spine needs to be strong to hold the energies and yet cannot be rigid or it will block the process of awakening.

Asana is by definition good posture and implies both symmetry and precision of the limbs, as well as a mental and sensory attitude of equanimity and focus. The spine's erect position and the subtle body's

openness is a prerequisite for good posture. In fact, it is as much a state of mind as it is a state of the body. The root of the Sanskrit word *asana* (pose), *as*, literally means to be or to abide, pointing to a restful and yet alert state of consciousness. When found, the radiant presence offers support and shines through the physical form.

The aim of *asana* practice is to create stability and resilience both mentally and spiritually (11.48). Iyengar (1991) describes this state as “perfection in action and freedom in consciousness” (160). Here, the *asana* takes on a new meditative form where the inner abiding self is sought out and the mind is in a high contemplative state (2.47).

Ahimsa: the importance of gentleness

The quest for inner stillness lies at the heart of yoga. This quest has paved the way for many diverse practices (*sadhanas*), all with the aim of creating a stable state of consciousness without fluctuation or agitation. This state of mind is described in Vyasa’s commentary on the Yoga Sutras as one of peace and non-harmfulness (1.13). It points to a practice and way of life that brings a quieting to our body and facilitates resting in ourselves. Only a serene mind and sattvified body can serve as a springboard for cultivating the higher states of consciousness.

In this regard, the principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*) must be at the core of practice. By becoming attuned to its varied landscape of feelings and impulses, we learn to work in harmony with, rather than against, the body. In this, the process of witnessing is a crucial tool. In entering into witnessing consciousness we let go of judgment and stay present and mindful without our usual reactivity to experience. Part of witnessing is

learning to hold tension with equanimity, so that reactivity is prevented or at least lessened. This in itself represents an attitude of *ahimsa*.

If we force our body and drive it like a machine, or use a goal oriented approach, we readily miss these inner markers of well being and inner calm. Yoga is structured to allow for resting in oneself, and only *ahimsa* can move us towards a sense of steadiness and ease. Bringing dysfunctional patterns of competitiveness and driven-ness into the practice will block the unfolding of the full potential being developed.

According to Cope (1999), yoga calls for a balanced approach that he characterizes as “clear seeing and calm abiding” (41). He notes that too much awareness without a strong foundation and development of equanimity is psychologically dangerous. In the yoga tradition, the body is likened to a vessel that has to be fired in a kiln, creating a form strong enough to tolerate and hold the powerful energies of the subtle body.

Once the subtle benefits of yoga are experienced, such as joy, inner anchoring and mental resilience, we become less interested in how many backbends brought us there or how well we did in class. The true gift of yoga becomes clear when daily life is impacted by its benefits. This can manifest itself in a variety of ways depending on what is needed in our individual lives and what we are going through at any given time.

In this approach, the body is an important site of knowledge and wisdom. We cannot dissociate the positions from our breathing and a mental attitude of non-harmfulness (*ahimsa*). Unless both are present, we will not receive the intuitions revealed through our body on a daily basis. They are interrelated, and it is not possible to think of *asana* as healing without

connecting it with breath-awareness, sensitivity and a self-compassionate attitude.

When the body is brought into a calm state it supports receptivity and revelatory insights important for healing and spiritual growth. Such cellular knowledge can be pre-cognitive in nature, so that we pick up cues at a visceral level that then guides decisions and helps prevent illness. In this way, the body is not just our greatest ally, but also an interpreter of everything that is happening in our surroundings.

When approached with care and a sense of listening, the body offers a new perspective and becomes the potential site for revelatory insights. To approach our own body with enmity or that of others with competition, is not only counter-productive but also fundamentally harmful. It blocks our joy for practice and places us in an adversarial relationship with self and others.

The five koshas and yoga

The yogic understanding of the physical body as part of a larger system of energy builds upon the earliest scriptures. One of the oldest maps of the subtle body is found in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, a scripture that is at least 3000 years old. In this ancient text, the model of the five sheaths (*pancha kosha*) is used to describe the subtle bodies that surround the self, or spirit (*atman*). According to this map, the self is hidden away, enclosed in a series of "bodies." To awaken from a sense of separation from our inner self, we need to explore and intimately know the five layers of the physical, vital, emotional, mental and blissful. These five *koshas* are: