

ASANA

"Penetration of our mind is the goal, but in the beginning to set things in motion, there is no substitute for sweat."

-B.K.S. Iyengar

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* describe the ancient tradition of yoga as an 8-fold physical, mental, and spiritual practice for a happy, healthy life. For most of us, our first foray into yoga is through the physical practice of hatha yoga: *asana*. Although *asana* is only mentioned in four of Patanjali's 195 aphorisms on yoga, the postures themselves are the primary focus of modern yoga.

The postures and ways to practice have evolved quite a bit over the last hundred years, but the end result remains the same. The physical practice of yoga unites body and mind in movement. It fosters overall good health in the body, while training the mind to be simultaneously alert, aware, and at ease. In this way it is an ideal first step toward the other yogic practices of concentration, meditation, and ultimately freedom.

These benefits don't magically occur after a dozen sun salutations, however. There are a few essential qualities that differentiate our practice from other forms of exercise. To harness the full potential of a consistent yoga practice, we must be mindful of action and intention on the mat.

B.K.S. Iyengar, master of precision in *asana*, outlines these qualities of a true yoga practice in *Light On Life*.

- **Awareness:** Move with intelligence through the postures. Cultivate awareness at a cellular level so that the body's individual parts can freely communicate to the mind the vital information transmitted through yoga *asana*.
- **Dynamic Extension:** Expansion and extension should begin from the core of one's being. This allows for sensitivity in the stretch, improving range of motion while safeguarding against injury.
- **Relaxation:** Even in very difficult poses, the face, throat, and neck should remain free of tension. Avoiding tension in the head and neck allows access to the back brain, where assessment, adjustment, and reflective action occur.
- **Lightness:** Move from the heart, rather than from the brain, to find lightness in every pose. Grace and softness in the postures enable more complete extension and expansion.
- **Balance:** All bodies have natural imbalances from one side to the other. Careful attention to the weaker and tighter areas can bring about balance in the body. Through a proper balance of solidity, dynamism, and luminosity (a.k.a. *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*) a yoga practice will avoid pain and sustain health in the body.
- **Right Pain:** Learn to identify and endure right pain, felt as a gradual lengthening and strengthening. Enduring right pain leads to tremendous growth and willpower, both on and off the mat. Wrong pain, a sudden and sharp cautionary feeling, lets the body know it has gone beyond its current abilities.
- **Perfecting:** Be happy with progress. Treat the body's "problem parts" with patience and love, finding newness in every practice.
- **Divine Yoga:** The practice of yoga *asana* is an expression of our innermost being. If practice is governed by the ego, it is likely to end in dis-ease or injury in the body. Move with pure intentions and reap immeasurable lifelong benefits.

This is just a summary of enormous and powerful concepts. For more in-depth study, read B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Life and Light on Yoga*, Georg Feuerstein's *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, Donna Farhi's *Bringing Yoga to Life*, and Judith Lasater's *Living Your Yoga*.