

DHYANA

"Yoga is a ladder we ascend, but whereas with a real ladder, when you are on the seventh (*dhyana*) rung, all your weight is on that rung, in yoga your weight is still equally on the preceding rungs that have aided your ascent"
-B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on Life*

In the physical practice of yoga, *asana*, we tend to get very specific. A good teacher doesn't just get you into a posture, but tells you what to do with all your parts. Think about all the cues you hear about your feet -- inner heel, outer seam, pinky side edge, big toe ball mound! (*Psst! If you're not hearing cues about specific parts where you practice, have we got the studio for you!*) All this specificity makes for healthy bodies and nicely aligned poses, but more importantly, it is awareness training that prepares us for the subtle lines we draw when we practice the inner limbs of yoga.

Since this where the transformative work happens, yogis get all kinds of specific about what we're doing when we turn inward. Focus, sustained concentration, and true connection with the Self are three different things. This month we examine *dhyana*, or meditation. Continuous meditation, to be exact. What is commonly called "meditation" is most often stress-reduction practice or mindfulness training. It involves devices like guided meditation, mantras, chimes, gongs, candle gazing, koans, and so on. *Dharana* fits into that category. *Dharana* is honing our concentration skills when we're "trying" to meditate. With *dhyana*, continuous meditation, it is do or do not. There is no try.

This is not meant as a discouraging statement, by any means (Yoda didn't mean it that way either). It is simply the difference between the two limbs. Pretty specific, right? The lovely imagery provided in ancient texts is quite illustrative: *dharana* is intermittent, like drops of water; *dhyana* is constant and flows smooth like honey. When we experience *dhyana*, the sights and sounds from the external world do not interrupt our meditative state -- we no longer hear the chimes in the room, let alone the ruckus in the hall. We have successfully turned off the inner chatter that's constantly identifying, naming, and grasping at objects in the outer world. What's left behind is the Self, the soul, the infinite (call it what you like), which is naturally at peace. A prolonged encounter with the Self is *samadhi*, the eighth limb.

We are still engaged with the outer limbs even as we steep ourselves in the quiet of the inner limbs. The practice of *asana* is essential for preparing the body and mind for the experience of *dhyana*, and for an experienced yogi, the two things may happen simultaneously. *Pranayama* (breath work) makes quick work of calming the mind. The *yamas* and *niyamas* (ethical practices) help us to see our actions in the outer world as they really are, so that we can be more at peace when we are sitting with ourselves.

A seasoned practitioner of meditation can experience the inner calm of *dhyana* in any situation, even if just for a moment. Upon returning to the hustle and bustle of daily life, we carry remnants of that complete calm with us. As for the practice itself, entire books are written about *dhyana*. Pick up Dean Sluyter's *Natural Meditation: A Guide to Effortless Meditative Practice* for an expert and accessible route to your own soul.

This is just a summary of enormous and powerful concepts. For more in-depth study, read Nicolai Bachman's *The Yoga Sutras*, Georg Feuerstein's *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, Rolf Gates's *Meditations from the Mat*, and B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga & Light on Life*.