

Yoga Posture As Mirrors

by Georg Feuerstein and Gary Kraftsow

Georg: Most people come to Yoga through the postures (asana), leapfrogging over the moral disciplines. What is your view on this?

Gary: Many years ago, when I was studying Sanskrit, I used the metaphor of 'first person, second person, third person,' and I find that most people try to jump from the first person to the third person.

The third person approach involves thinking that a given posture should look a certain way, and when you find that your body cannot actually perform the posture, you superimpose your will on your structure, which happens through the medium of muscular contraction.

And so you end up creating rigidity in the structure, maybe even hyper mobility in the joints, instead of having a sort of I -Thou, second-person relationship to it all.

In the I -Thou relationship, as Martin Buber called it, the posture is a mirror to help you see something about your body, and then based on what you see, you make some changes.

Yoga Asanas Posture

So people tend to think of asana as some kind of external thing, but it's not at all. It's a mirror to help you see something about ourselves, and then on the basis of that seeing, you take some action to change things.

If you relate to asana in this way, it actually parallels the whole process of deepening your self-awareness and transcending some of your dysfunctions.

Thus, asana is a part of the process of transformation, and the methodology is the same, as you would use in working through certain psychological issues in your personality.

Georg: Otherwise, one strives to realize some idealized archetype instead of finding out what the archetype, the appropriate posture, is in one's own case.

Gary: People tend to make icons out of their asanas, just as they tend to make icons out of their teachers, their belief systems, and their ideas. Then asana practice becomes something that you worship, which is completely absurd.

Georg: In other words, instead of becoming an attitude that is an integral part of one's life, the asana is turned into postural posing...

Gary:..which means it becomes dead, fixed, rigid.

Georg: Is this the kind of thing you discuss in your forthcoming book on Yoga therapy?

Gary: The first part of [my book](#) is on the methodology of practice, so I talk about how to relate to practice so that it is an authentic process for yourself rather than an imposition of will.

Yoga Basic Postures

Then I say something about the art and science of adaptation. According to the Viniyoga tradition of Shri Krishnamacharya and T.K.V. Desikachar, there is not, for example, a fixed form for a given posture, but rather there are multiple forms. Also, you can do the postures in different ways in order to access different parts of your body.

Georg: This also means that there may not only be all these variations, but that in the course of your life you may do the postures differently depending on your situation.

Gary: Absolutely, in the course of a week I may use the same posture in different ways, depending upon what I am trying to achieve.

Beginning Yoga Posture

Georg: Then how does one learn a posture so that it arises naturally?

Gary: There are two parts to this. First, there is a certain way of using the breath. For us, the core of asana practice is understanding how to use the breath.

Working with the breath is not coincidental or something for which you wait until you are more advanced. Breath is actually the medium of movement in the posture. Thus it becomes a way of accessing or feeling internally what's happening in the body.

Second, you obviously have to have a certain amount of training. In my teacher training, I go over all the different ways of adapting the form of a posture in order

to emphasize certain parts of the body. Also we need to learn how to adapt the breath, because there is not just one way of using it.

The whole orientation of our practice is not to create the body in one's own image or someone else's image, but to discover the body through the process as it unfolds. It doesn't take long to train people to begin to feel what's actually happening in their body.

Hatha Yoga Posture

Georg: Do you think a conflict could arise because some people might think, "If there is no one form for an asana, I am free to do it in any way I like"?

Gary: Yes, that happens and people say, "I just follow my intuition." But in our training, we are educating the intuition, and there also are certain parameters within which we work. The postures described in such manuals as the Hatha-Yoga-Pradipika reveal something about our potential as human beings. But this doesn't mean that everybody should do all the postures.

What is functional for your body may be quite different for someone else. What your body needs is likely to be different from what my body needs.

So, the classical texts were accompanied by an oral transmission from teacher to student, and I think the written text simply served as an aid to memory. The texts were never intended to contain the whole teaching.

Gary: I think people take the classic idea of a posture too far. You may do the form correctly, but this doesn't mean you will achieve the function. If you can do the form correctly, this may be because your body has certain release valves. In our workshop on movement therapy, I often ask, "Who can do upavishta konasana?"

This posture requires you to sit on the floor with your legs spread far apart. Well, there are always those who can naturally extend their legs all the way.

Georg: Because they are 'double-jointed.'

Gary: Well, what's happening is that they are experiencing the real work of the posture. So if you are too loose, you can't achieve the function. If you are too tight and are trying too hard, you will never get there either.

In my experience, for most people-whether they are too loose or too tight-we have to adapt the posture so that they can derive benefit from it.

Georg: Would you say, then, that for a person wanting to incorporate Hatha-Yoga into a very simple home practice, very few postures are needed?

Gary: Right. You need very, very few postures. From a collection of perhaps fifteen different asanas, you can create a practice that will last you an entire lifetime. There is no need to go on adding ever more postures.

In our tradition, the orientation of the practice varies. If the orientation is to develop what we call sharira-samyama, or mastery of the body, then of course you need to learn a lot of postures. But if your goal is arogya, or health, you need very few postures. If you want to learn postures for prolonged dhyana, or meditation, then it is also very simple.

Yoga Pose Sequence

Georg: Can you say a little more about adaptation in relation to sequencing?

Gary: Many schools have a fixed sequence of postures, but there is a whole art and science of creating different sequences, of combining various postures to serve your present needs. For instance, on one day you may have more or less time, or you may have a back problem, neck pain, or something wrong with your digestion, or you may be emotionally distressed.

This sequencing is called vinyasa. People think that this Sanskrit word means 'flow,' but it actually means 'steps.' We use the terms vinyasa and pratikriya. Vinyasa stands for preparation, and `conveys compensation.

The art and science of combination is one of the most difficult and most important aspects of the process. As a teacher I find that the quality of a class is influenced by the types of postures I select.

A lot of other teachers go by a formula. They may have one sequence or perhaps two or three, from which they arbitrarily select a sequence whereas the Krishnamacharya / Desikachar tradition that I am using has a very highly articulated science of sequencing.

I also introduce the biomechanics of movement. Here I answer questions like, What is a forward bend? What are the ways in which the body avoids the effect of a forward bend?

We may be impressed with someone whose hips flop over in this posture, but actually loose hips are again something like a release valve, denying a practitioner the beneficial stretch in the back.

In my book I go systematically through all the postures, answering such

questions as, what is a backward bend? What is a twist? What are lateral bends? What is extension, inversion, and so forth?

Then I discuss therapy for common aches and pains, chronic disease, and emotional health. There are thirty-one photographed sequences in the book, which is something like a textbook.

Georg: All five hundred pages of it! I think it's a wonderful project. One problem you may encounter is that suddenly there will be a lot of people teaching this way without the necessary background.

Benefit Yoga Posture

Gary: Well, the way I handled that somewhat is by including case studies. There are chapters on the digestive system, the cardiovascular system, and the respiratory system. I talk about the function of these systems, and then I categorize illnesses that can impact each system in relation to conditions of excess or conditions of deficiency.

Then I present a case study based on people I have actually worked with, which makes my prescriptions for sequences specific to these individuals.

This will show my readers that Yoga therapy is a real tradition that is a very effective way of treating a lot of conditions. It may not be able to cure all health condition, but by treating the individuals who have those conditions, it can help them feel better about themselves. In this way, Yoga therapy can sometimes indirectly improve the condition.

Certainly with structural problems and certain of the chronic diseases, we can really help. But mainly we can show people who have these conditions that they can do a lot themselves toward improving their health.

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