

Yoga as a View, Practice and Tool

Part One – Yoga as a View

Rāja Yoga – Yoga and Samādhi



Yoga as a Process

– The View, Path and Goal towards Samādhi as in Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra

It is interesting these days that as a Yoga teacher the question I am more likely to be asked is ‘What kind of Yoga do you do?’ rather than ‘What is Yoga?’. It’s either that we think we know what Yoga is or, more likely, that the view is becoming lost within the myriad of ways in which Yoga is offered.

These days there seems to be little apparent clarity around what Yoga is, or if there is a view, it is not very apparent.

This view may also be coloured by religious influences such as Hinduism, Sikhism or even bodywork paradigms such as physical culture, body building, gymnastics and even wrestling.

In the Yoga world today in the West it seems as if many teachers are teaching without a clear ‘view’ of what Yoga is and how we might realize this view.

Look for example at how we appear not to even know or use the Yoga name for meditation. Here the often used phrase is Āsana, Prāṇāyāma and Meditation.

Or saying I am going to do Yoga which invariably refers to getting the sticky rather than the zafu out. One can even come across websites and Yoga writings that refer to Yoga and Meditation as if they are different. How about a reframe into Yoga is meditation?

In terms of what is presented as Yoga today where is the view? We need to have a view, we need to know how to access it and we need to know how to stabilise and sustain it.

In Yoga the View is explored most eloquently in the Yoga Sūtra and its main focus is the relationship between two aspects that constantly interact in sustaining our sense of being and individuality.

The two aspects are that of the perpetual activity of the mind or Citta and the ever present quality of stillness inherent within the awareness of Cit.

When the Citta dominates, we are more in the past than the present and when Cit dominates we are more in the present than the past.

The premise of the Yoga Sūtra is that when the past takes over we are more liable to act and interact unskillfully. Even within different aspects of our Yoga practice when a disturbance arises it is because the past has taken over, a memory has arisen.

However if there was no past there would be no Citta. Citta is like a vault full of past memories. Within this ever active process we want to create a space between impulse and reaction.

So looking at many Yoga classes today what is the View that we are trying to guide the group towards? Yoga would argue that ultimately we want to enable the student to have the ability to sit and to be able to experience a quality of stillness.

If the teacher does not have a 'view' to inspire and guide them whilst accommodating the many vagaries of Yoga classes today then we are more likely to be looking at the view dissolving into the many nuances of postural performance.

A Yoga view would be that a group class moves from the starting point of physicality towards some point of stillness, giving students an experience of 'sitting' and experiencing the potential of stillness at some point along the way.

The priority in terms of what we are trying to teach is 'stillness' or an experience of 'Cit'. Can I be present within the activities of the mind? The longer I can be present, the more awareness that can emerge.

When people touch that stillness something happens – a wanting to move away from the dominance of the activities of the Citta.

The more that we go back in time with Yoga the more we see that the goal was the achievement of the ability to sit and experience stillness. The more forward we move in time with Yoga the more we see the movement towards increased physicality.

The View primarily comes down to the relationship or yoking of activity (citta) with stillness (cit), in order to facilitate the emergence of stillness within the landscape of the mind.

Images such as the emergence of the sun (clarity) as the cloud (confusion) recedes may help to convey a sense of the process.

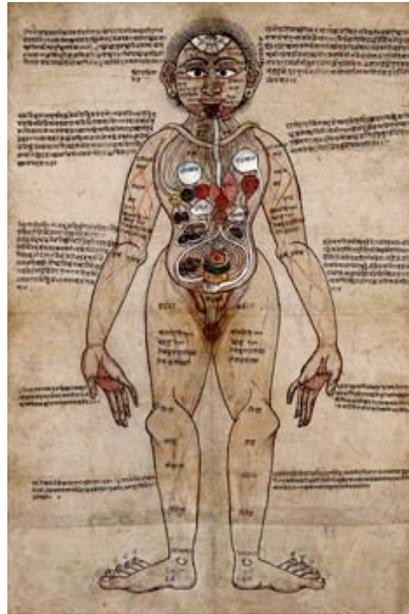
When a student reaches the end of the practice something touches them. It's about the settling of the mind into stillness. The flux of the Citta settling within the presence of the Cit.

Is it not the Yoga teachers responsibility to guide students towards this experience and empower them to realize they can touch this sacred space for themselves outside of the class or guided practice environment?

Yoga as a View, Practice and Tool

Part Two – Yoga as a Practice

Haṭha Yoga – Yoga and Prāṇa



Yoga as Alchemy – The Place and Purpose of Prāṇa, Agni, Nāḍī & Cakra

Another irony in the emerging role and identity of Yoga in the West today is with regard to the term Haṭha Yoga. The term is mainly used generically these days to identify and group ‘physically’ based Yoga practices.

As a teacher I am often asked in connection with the question what kind of Yoga do you teach, is it Haṭha Yoga?

The irony is that when we look at what Haṭha Yoga really is we find that the physical elements are relatively limited with very few Āsana discussed.

Furthermore within the few discussed the most important are concerned with sitting, in preparation for practice elements other than Āsana.

Primarily to facilitate a quality of being able to sit still and as if move beyond the physical body.

Here the primary concern and field of activity for Haṭha Yoga practitioners is with regard to the energetic ‘Prāṇa’ body or Prāṇamaya and its role in helping to facilitate a quality of energetic ‘clarity’ and energetic ‘stillness’, ultimately as a ladder to support the practitioners exploration of meditational states of being in terms of Rāja Yoga or the Yoga of Samādhi.

The role of Haṭha is to help take the student towards the View of Rāja and to help focus the energy necessary to refine the View.

What is important also is that we understand the various influences that exist in the West today in terms of ‘Modern Postural Yoga’.

What seems to be in danger of being lost in all of this are the ‘energetic principles’ that underpin Haṭha Yoga because people have become very focused on the physicality, or even gymnastic type influences.

It seems that modern Yoga practice is dominated by Āsana and the words Āsana and Yoga appears to have become sadly synonymous.

A further irony is that there is an increasing body of research suggesting that even this postural repertoire and physical style of performance is hugely Westernised in terms of both origins and emphasis.

This is especially curious when we consider one of the primary practices inherent within the teachings of Haṭha is a set of breathing practices called Prāṇāyāma.

Furthermore its role in working on the energetic matrix within the individual is often the most neglected aspect of Yoga practice.

The purpose of our teaching is to use the energetic principles and practices inherent within the techniques of Haṭha (Āsana, Prāṇāyāma and Mudrā) to bring the student more towards Rāja.

The purpose of Haṭha is to prepare the mind for the rigors of Rāja. Generally seen by modern commentators as synonymous with the meditational essence of the Yoga Sūtra, its purpose is to lead the student towards a greater awareness of and in the mind.

So what are the energetic principles that are the focus for inquiry within Haṭha Yoga? Some examples of these primary concepts are:

- Pañca Prāṇa (the five aspects of Air)
- Agni (the digestive fire)
- Tridoṣa (the constitutional characteristics)
- Dvadasa Nādī (the primary pathways)
- Ṣat Cakra (the six centres)

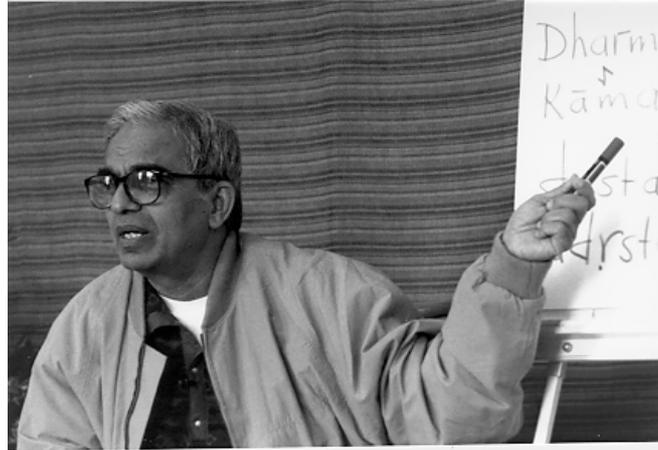
A purpose of Haṭha is to understand how to utilize these energetic principles as a means towards realising the view of Yoga as Samādhi, called in the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, Rāja Yoga.

A question that arises at this point is, how much do the various tools (styles or approaches) of Yoga engage, adhere and respect the principles of practice in order to help realize the view of Yoga?

Yoga as a View, Practice and Tool

Part Three – Yoga as a Tool

The viniyoga of Yoga – Yoga and Sādhana



Yoga as a Tool – The Art of viniyoga for developing a Personalized Practice

Yoga as a tool is more likely to be the starting point for most students these days in that we often choose a style or approach to Yoga as a starting point in our Yoga experience.

There are many, many choices these days, although the common denominator now appears to be based around Yoga teachers rather than Yoga teachings.

For example we can choose from Anusāra, Aṣṭāṅga, Bikram, Dru, Gītānada, Integral, Iyengar, Jīvamukti, Kripālu, Kuṇḍalinī, Sahaja, Scaravelli, Śivananda, Satyānanda, the viniyoga of Yoga, etc.

Which is fine in itself. However the question that arises is how do the various methodologies relate to the principles of practice in order to realize the view of Yoga?

My own field of expertise lies within the teachings often referred to as the viniyoga of Yoga, so I can only speak with experience from this perspective.

The primary principle here is that the practices of Yoga must be adapted to the starting point, potential and needs of the student. Within this premise is a further question how, or even how much, the tools of Yoga utilize the practice principles of Haṭha, in order to realize the view of Yoga as formulated in what is seen as a primary teaching on Rāja Yoga or the Yoga of Samādhi, the Yoga Sūtra.

This developmental process often starts with the physical limitations of the student in terms of Āsana. However, how much does this process integrate the principles behind practice and also evolve towards exploring the spiritual potential inherent within all beings?

A further factor are the ambitions of the student in wanting to explore beyond what we take to be the everyday self.

These days the purpose and role of Yoga is much broader or, perhaps some may argue, shallower in the ways Yoga (often meaning just Āsana) is presented.

However these myriad of possibilities in the ways Yoga can be presented, speaks highly of the potentials of Yoga to meet many needs such as exercise, fitness, health recovery, stress reduction, emotional balance, mental performance, energetic stability, to name but a few modern examples of Yoga as a tool.

From my own background the developmental tools of Yoga come from my deep immersion in the teachings of T Krishnamacharya as received through many years of individual lessons with my root Yoga teacher TKV Desikachar.

Within this 25 years of study were the tools of applying Yoga individually (the viniyoga of Yoga) in appropriate and developmental steps according to the needs, interest, potentials and possibilities of each student's journey.

Within these teachings the tools include:

- Intelligent practice planning according to needs, time available, personal abilities, energy, potentials and desires of the student.
- The importance of the breath within Āsana and Prāṇāyāma.
- The refinement of the practice from Āsana towards Dhyānam.
- The principles of developmental application of the tools to bring the student closer to the qualities inherent within the goals of practice.
- The application of a customised developmental practice according to stage of life, gender, profession, family commitments, constitutional health, energetic tendencies and psychological characteristics.

So it appears that the conceptual models of Rāja or Haṭha on their own mean little without the tools of intelligent and appropriate application (viniyoga).

Plus the link of tools to the principles of practice must also in turn link to the view which underpins the processes of Haṭha Yoga towards Rāja Yoga.

To summarise the three aspects or strands for Yoga Practice and Study:

1. Yoga as a View of Samādhi as a process for our long term goal map.
2. Yoga as alchemical Practice according to the principles of Haṭha as guidance for the direction of our physical and energetic practices.
3. Yoga as a customizable Tool for intelligent, appropriate and developmental application of our practice as a personal Sādhana.

This is also why I have chosen to focus this last phase of my Yoga teaching work around expanding the possibilities for student's personal development rather than just learning for yourself through teacher training courses.

The Personal Sādhana Programme now offers many separate, yet linked, strands each with modular developmental options for deepening our exploration of Yoga from the personal perspective. Learn Rāja, Haṭha and viniyoga firstly in terms of training for our lifetime of work with ourselves.

Rather than the current vogue of trying to learn to train as a student amidst training as a teacher for others. This is the message of T Krishnamacharya and TKV Desikachar within viniyogasāra or the essence of viniyoga.

Paul Harvey November 2010