

Developing the Witness "On the Mat"

From the Kripalu Center archives

Because yoga asanas are not so much about exercise as they are about learning and unlearning, it is not the movement itself, but the quality of attention we bring to the movement that makes asanas qualify as yoga. Yoga actually begins to change the body by reeducating the brain. There is a particular way of moving, characteristic of classical posture practice, which heightens our brain's capacity to draw areas of the body's unconscious up into consciousness. Slow, deliberate movement anchors the mind in sensation and allows a deep relearning to happen. Western science has now discovered why this is so. When muscles are moved slowly and consciously, the movement is brought under the control of the most refined aspect of the brain.

The refinement of our proprioceptive capacities requires moving the locus of control over the area of concern – the musculature, initially, and later the nervous systems, organs, fluids and subtle body- to the most refined centers of learning in the neocortex, and from there to the seat of witness consciousness, or "buddhi", a structure in the mind which has not been identified by Western science. There are certain ways of practicing on the mat that insure that this will be so. Interestingly, Patanjali nailed the most important of these almost two thousand years ago.

Patanjali's sutra on postures gives the critical piece of advice here: "The posture is steady and comfortable". When the body moves beyond the point of comfortable toleration of sensation, we lose our equanimity – we lose the balance of the mind. When this happens, deeper levels of awareness are no longer possible. The mind becomes restless and dissociated. We move away from experience rather than toward it. There are certain components of practice which yogis have found essential in order to promote optimal learning and unlearning. These are:

- Creating an environment in which concentration is supported. A quiet, uninterrupted space without distractions of any kind, even music, can be important, especially when concentration is weak.
- Moving slowly and deliberately. When we're untying a complicated knot, we know enough to first look carefully, then gently undo the tangle. A hard yank on the cord will just make the knot tighter. So, too, with the body's knots. Slow, intentional movement creates a kind of absorption in the mind, which allows precise internal sensations to be tracked very consciously. This kind of movement keeps awareness centered in the neocortex, and works against the body being hijacked by the primitive brains.
- Keeping awareness focused on the internal sensations and feelings. We are interested in the internal experience of the posture, not in trying to recreate some picture from a book. While alignment is important, too much preoccupation with the external experience triggers the false self-complex, which is located in the more primitive, unconscious brain. In order to keep attention focused, expectations for achievement and external success must be minimized.
- Moving gently without strain. Straining is extremely counterproductive. It only creates tons of sensory feedback that is really irrelevant to what we're trying to bring under conscious control. It is important to minimize white noise in the system as we're focusing

deeply. Therefore, it is best to always keep it simple — to do less rather than more. Part of internal safety comes from monitoring the feeling of the posture in the body. There must be plenty of permission and encouragement to watch and get to know where one's own individual edge is, learning to honor that and not forcing a posture beyond those limits. Forcing will not help the muscles relax. Quite the contrary: If we attempt to voluntarily force a muscle that is involuntarily contracted, it will contract even more tightly and finally to the point of spasm.

- Cultivating persistence and patience. In order to relearn deeply wired-in patterns, there must be plenty of repetition, done with consciousness. This requires the development of patience and persistence. Effort is brought to bear, in the real practice of yoga, not in forcing complicated and difficult postures, but in doing postures consciously, slowly, and deliberately. This requires the cultivation of patience and strong determination — but not force. Force and aggression simply override the consciousness that we're trying to create.

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