



Responsibility in yoga and the ethics of a body-friendly practice

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The apparently obvious

A restless mind (*citta*) is an integral part of living human beings, just like breath, and it is one of the age-old principles of yoga that the two of them are directly connected. There are numerous references to this in the written sources such as the Upanishads and the Yoga Sutra.

From the viewpoint of yoga, the human body is the home to both, and all three are in a permanent process of change. This is most apparent in the body: from conception, through pregnancy, birth, childhood and mid-life, until death, it undergoes huge changes.

These changes bring with them a whole range of challenges for every human, and as such are, as it were, the central topic of life for the mind. But if the individual mind is subjected to too much strain, or even insufficiently challenged, and reaches the limit of what it can cope with, then help is needed. This is exactly where the philosophy of yoga comes in. It shows us the way to a practicable and meaningful way of life (*nyama*), and coherent interaction with society (*yama*) – through a constructive discourse with the dynamics of the mind.

Body-friendly practice

Since the mind *per se* is difficult to understand and grasp, over the millennia an indirect approach via the body and breath has proved to be one of the most astute methods. The body provides a wonderful approach to practice, and one that is easy to grasp. Herein lies the greatest strength of the concept of yoga, and at the same time its greatest weaknesses. It does indeed work, but its benefits for the body do not last long if we succumb to the enormous temptation to reign in a restless mind with a practice that is just as intensive.

At first sight the limits to what the body can cope with seem endless. But on closer inspection it is clear that its vulnerability lies in its complexity. Because the body is a representative of the other two aspects – breath and mind – it is important that we take great care in the way that we handle it. Subjectively we cannot really understand the body anyway, since human consciousness constantly faces obstacles (to put it more generally: *kleśa*, *antarāya* and *guṇa*). This is the case whether our focus is directed within or without.

For this reason we need qualified, sensitive teachers, above all since being too eager, lethargic and impatient, as well as ignorant, prevents us from practising sensibly, not only at the beginning, but normally over a very long time. Patient and attentive practice is vital in order to master this phase of practice when the danger of injury is high. We need a third party to confront us with the proverbial mirror. In short: Every yoga teacher who passes on the doctrine of yoga needs a good yoga teacher themselves. The mainstays for this are regular practice – abhyāsa – as well as patience and detachment – vairāghya –. It takes a great deal of time to develop the necessary degree of healthy self-awareness. This in turn is not a matter of course, as statistics on the number of injuries in the yoga world have shown for years – and the tendency is increasing.

Self-awareness in yoga practice

A reminder: Dealing with changes in our life is the greatest challenge that the mind faces, and a central theme in human life, whether consciously or sub-consciously. An approach via the body has proved to be successful in constructive schooling of the unruly. However, sensible practice requires a relatively clear mind, and so from the start one of the focuses has to be on schooling common sense. This is best achieved by a much-reduced practice. Depending on the time of day and year, on how you are feeling, and what stage of your life you are in, it is vital to constantly adapt your yoga practice. In this way, the experience over the months and years can lead to an ever better appreciation of your own body. But reduced practice doesn't necessarily mean simple practice. Rather, the interplay of body, breath and mind should be constantly incorporated into the schooling process. This can be an enormous challenge.

For the body this doesn't just mean copying a particular posture. It is a matter of reminding the body of its capability for self-awareness, for being aware of an aesthetics of movement and posture that is its own and can be experienced. Assuming a posture and coming back out of it to the starting point is a particularly important part of this: the focus is on the experience of movement.

Human beings are designed to be in motion, and this is the reason why the greatest potential for schooling the entire complex of muscles, connective tissue and the skeleton lies in movement. What is more, movements can be simplified almost infinitely. When movement is then combined with breathing, this is the beginning of the simultaneous schooling of body, breathing and mind discussed above. If one of these elements reaches its limits, then innumerable variations are possible.

Breathing-led practice

For example, if (a lack of) detachment with regard to the body's limits is an important theme for a student, then simple movements can be replaced with complex ones, as long as they do not place too little or too much strain on them when combined with breathing. The fact that they master a new, complex task leads to the avoidance of frustration, and a new composure is attained. At the same time they achieve a finer understanding of the interplay between body and breathing.

When the demands of it are only light, then breathing can be experienced and discovered in its full depth. As a link between body and mind, breathing has a very special protective

function: subtly (sūkṣma) schooled breathing is the best barometer for a harmonious treatment of the body – in the sense of a balance between stability and lightness (sthira and sukha) in every movement and posture. At the same time, awareness in the context of practice is the direct access to presence.

When one consciously breathes calmly (aesthetics of breathing), breathing automatically reduces the tendency of the mind to clouding, and so increases the clarity of one's own perception. In this way Patanjali's idea can be produced almost as a side effect: suffering that is yet to come can be avoided (Yogasūtra 2.16).

Conclusion: practice in the age of modern yoga

Both the student and the teacher bear responsibility for ensuring that yoga is practiced in a body-friendly manner. Nobody has to be perfect, and perfection is no more than an idealised model and an orientation point. However, both the student and the teacher are in a position to take care of both their own body (in which they live) and the community (in which they live). The teacher bears a particular responsibility, and should be one step further down the path of practice than their student so that they can protect the latter from harm.

In the age of arthritis caused by jogging and marathons, migraines from swimming goggles and mobile phone necks, we need to rethink the relevance for most people of excessive yoga postures which place extreme stress on the joints, as well as reverse postures such as the head- or shoulderstand and the plough; and question whether they have a place at all – out of love for the body and responsibility for modern society.

What happens otherwise? Yoga is used as a preventive practice for burnout, but is then followed by rehab for the shoulders, knees and the spine. That is not how yoga practice should be. That would be running away down a dead end.

That is definitely not what yoga is about.

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