

ASANA AS A TOOL: A VINIYOGA APPROACH

An Interview with Gary Kraftsow

Gary Kraftsow is one of the most highly respected teachers of the Krishnamacharya/Desikachar tradition of Viniyoga. Gary believes that asana practice is a tool and it has to be integrated with deeper aspects of Yoga practice to make a real difference in our spiritual lives, otherwise its benefits remain more superficial. In this interview, he explains the Viniyoga approach to asana and how it relates to the Kriya Yoga of Patanjali and to the five kosha system.

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): Is there too much focus on asana in the Yoga community? What is the focus in Viniyoga?

Gary Kraftsow (GK): I have observed a progressively limited appreciation for the scope of the tradition in the 35 years I've been in the Yoga community. I often remind students that asanas have no value on their own, their only value is in how they serve the individual when they are practicing. Although asanas have a great value for our anatomical structures and, to a certain extent our physiology, it is when we adapt asanas in service of *pranayama*, adapt *pranayama* in the service of meditation, and adapt meditation in the service of prayer that we are able to use this integrated practice to penetrate deeply into the core of our beings.

Viniyoga's approach is breath-centric. The fundamental focus is on the flow of the breath as it relates to movement of spine. We use repetition and focus on going in and out of postures in combination with holding them, rather than just holding them statically. This has both muscular-skeletal and neuromuscular benefits. Our focus is less on mastering the form of the posture than on adapting the form of the posture to produce specific functional benefits.

We use asana as a mirror, to see what's going on with our spines, to see if our joints are stable or hyper-mobile, if our muscles are contracted, weak, or developed asymmetrically, etc. Then, we adapt the forms of asana to improve skeletal alignment, stabilize hyper-mobile joints, restore muscular symmetry, strengthen weak muscles, create functional movement patterns and so on. Our detailed science of sequencing, known as *vinyasa karma*, enables practitioners to create different sequences for different needs. Finally, we think of using asana in the service of *pranayama*—to help prepare the mind for meditation, which prepares the heart for prayer.

IYM: What about using asana to treat psychological issues?

GK: Asana is only a part of the process for working with emotions. Our approach isn't: I'm depressed, so I do some kind of supported backbend. From a yogic perspective, emotion is a general term consisting of various parts including: physiology, mood, cognition and behavior. A depressed condition may involve complex factors such as sympathetic suppression (physiologic component), a feeling of persistent sadness (mood component), a self-concept such as: "I am not good enough" (cognitive component), an unhealthy diet and progressive social withdrawal (behavior

component). When we use Yoga to work with emotions, asana is only a part. We can use asana and *pranayama* to address physiology, self-reflective meditation to address cognition, chanting and mantra for mood and lifestyle disciplines to address behavior. So, it's this integrated approach that makes our work holistic and so effective.

IYM: Can Patanjali's Kriya Yoga inform our asana practice?

GK: Kriya Yoga (*tapas, svadhyaya, Ishvara pranidhana*) is the science of deep *sadhana*. Patanjali gives this model to represent the three component parts of *sadhana* to make our action truly transformational. If we are not self-conscious of our movement patterns, we will reinforce them in our practice. This habitual patterning extends beyond our movements and includes our breathing, thoughts, emotional responses, and our behavior. In asana, conscious movement enables us to create neuromuscular re-education. This begins to train us to become more aware of our activity at every level. Kriya Yoga is about making all our activities conscious and intentional as a means of creating new and more functional patterns, a foundation for transformation.

Vyasa, in his classic commentary on the *Yoga Sutras*, said that the highest *tapas* is *pranayama*. Sri Ramana Maharishi said *tapas* involves returning to the source of thoughts, as each thought arises. *Tapas* means: to cook, heat, purify. It suggests, breaking habit patterns, purifying the mind and body and strengthening the will. When Krishnamacharya left the body, his son Desikachar gave up apples. This is a different kind of lifestyle discipline than giving up something for health reasons, which of course is very useful. With Desikachar's inspiration, I gave up dairy products when my own father died. I didn't do that because of health concerns. I wanted to make an offering and, in addition, see if my intention was stronger than my habits. Initially it was hard but now it is not an issue. This kind of discipline, a form of *tapas*, strengthens the will.

Svadhyaya literally means, "to move toward the Self." In the Hindu tradition, *svadhyayanam* is a technical term that refers to chanting mantras that are part of one's family clan (*Gotra*). Each clan was associated with a particular section of the *Vedas*. The proscribed mantras from those sections of the *Vedas* teach us about who we are and about our proper relationships to family, community and even the Divine. The deeper meaning of *svadhyaya* is "coming back to oneself." It encompasses anything that helps us understand ourselves more deeply, including listening to inspiring

teachers, reading inspiring texts and, most importantly, practicing deep, self-reflective meditation. *Svadhya*, applied to asana, means paying careful attention to what is actually happening in our bodies when we practice. *Svadhya* implies a deep level of understanding why we are practicing each asana and what it can do for us.

The traditional meaning of *Ishvara pranidhana* is “surrender to God.” The Yoga teachings of Patanjali are uniquely nonsectarian, and Patanjali’s text is not a theological document. He seems to be speaking more about the effect of faith in God on an individual’s psychology than about specific details about God. From this nonsectarian perspective, *Ishvara pranidhana* suggests that recognizing something bigger than oneself is foundational in one’s life. Traditionally, it is practiced as *puja*, including: chanting, ritual and prayer. Without belonging to any sectarian faith, we can experience this feeling by expressing gratitude and having a commitment to something greater than our own self-interests.

Ishvara pranidhana helps us transcend our self-importance, reducing the “tyranny of the me.” During asana practice, *Ishvara pranidhana* suggests both being open, listening for guidance and being more focused on the process than the results. Thinking of Kriya Yoga in an integrated perspective, we can consider *tapas* as being fully present in each moment and not simply following our habit patterns; *svadhya* as using the postures as tools for self-investigation and self-transformation; and *Ishvara pranidhana* as being open, listening and offering all benefits to something beyond our own self-interests.

IYM: Would you explain asana and the *kosha* system?

GK: The five *koshas* relate to the multi-dimensional nature of the human system. The ancients conceived of asana as a tool to help balance the first *kosha*, *annamaya*, or the food body. We can think of the food body as our functional anatomy, including our bones, joints, muscles and movement patterns. Asana helps our bodies to grow in balanced ways, as well as to rectify them when damaged or injured. The *pranamaya kosha* refers to the vital body. We can think of the vital body in terms of our physiological systems. The ancients conceived of *pranayama* and dietary guidelines to optimize physiological functioning as well as enhance the flow of *prana* in our systems. Of course, it is not clear that the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, which is the source of this teaching, was referring to functional anatomy and physiology, but it is a useful way to use this model to understand the holistic perspective of the Yoga system.

Manomaya kosha refers to the part of the mind (*manas*) that takes in information from the outside via the senses, and it points to our ability to focus, pay attention and learn from the outside. The ancients developed chanting as a tool to learn and memorize the *Vedas*, *Charaka Samhita*, *Yoga Sutra* and other important texts. This *kosha* enables us to take



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Gary Kraftsow

in this wisdom and integrate it. *Vijnanamaya kosha* relates to our deep orientation, our values and priorities, issues of the personality. The ancients conceived of *svadhya* and meditation to develop one’s personality and character and to rectify anything dysfunctional.

Anandamaya kosha is our capacity for happiness and joy. Part of our *dharma* is to be happy—to arrive at *sukha*, *santosha* and *ananda* (wellbeing, contentment and joy). Part of our Yoga practice is designed to achieve that by cultivating a living relationship with “that which is never ending.” *Ananda* doesn’t refer to a great meal, a beautiful sunrise or one’s first kiss, because all those things are subject to change. *Ananda* is the bliss of a relationship with that which never changes, expressed as our essential Self (*Atman*) or God (*Ishvara*).

For asana to fit into the whole picture, for it to be truly transformational, it has to be integrated with the deeper aspects of Yoga practice so that it penetrates all these levels and reaches the deepest level: *ananda*. For our Yoga practices to be transformational they have to connect with and lead us to, “follow our bliss,” follow our hearts—that for which we love and long.

Gary Kraftsow began his study of Yoga with T.K.V. Desikachar in 1974. He is the founder/director of the American Viniyoga Institute, trains teachers in Viniyoga and Yoga therapy and he designed the protocol for a National Institutes of Health study on low-back pain. He is the author of *Yoga for Wellness, Yoga for Transformation and two DVDs, “Viniyoga Therapy for Low Back, Sacrum and Hips,” and “Viniyoga Therapy for Upper Back, Neck and Shoulders.” For more information, visit: www.viniyoga.com.*