

asana

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spiritual practice



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According to the Bhagavad-Gita: "At the moment of creation, a portion of Me (God) became part of the living soul of every living creature." The Divine techniques of Yoga exist only to help us move deep within beyond the Maya (illusion) that the mind and senses project of the material world into the Heart Center so that we may discover who we really are. Maharishi Patanjali lays out the classic blueprint in his *Yoga-Sutras* for achieving this end as an Eight-Limbed Path known as Astanga Yoga. The first two limbs or Angas are the Ethical Rules

By Sri Yogi Dharma Mittra

(*Yama* – thinking good thoughts) and the Observances (*Niyama* – doing good actions)). If one is to have any success with the Holy Science of Hatha-Raja Yoga, every action must be according to *Yama* and *Niyama* in word, thought and deed. Living in this fashion is Yoga and being firmly established in the first *Yama* (*Ahimsa* – thinking good thoughts), one begins to recognize sameness everywhere and develop that most essential of all attributes: compassion. Another dividend of this firm grounding in *Yama* and *Niyama* is that the *Sadhaka* (spiritual aspirant) develops a burning desire for liberation. Firmly established in *Yama* and *Niyama*, the *Sadhaka* is now ready for the physical exercises, the third limb of Astanga Yoga – the practice of *Asana*. To make the practice of the postures even better than meditation, be sure to offer every action to the Supreme Self or God.

Like *Yama* and *Niyama*, *Asana* is in actuality just a preparation. We do all these difficult and fancy poses not so we can place both feet behind our heads, but so that we can make the body strong, flexible and healthy. As it is said, “Healthy body, healthy mind.” Only a mind which is calm (healthy), can find the unbroken concentration which is meditation. Steady, regular practice of the exercises will bestow upon the *Sadhaka* radiant health. If one is distracted by disease or physical discomfort, how will they ever know peace of mind?

There are so many things that one may learn from the faithful practice of the *Asana*. One learns steadiness in the face of adversity as one stays in the postures longer. It is only by this method that one truly makes progress. The body and mind are truly like young children. They wish to be given comfort and treats and have little tolerance for anything other than pleasure. Posture practice can help to train the body and mind and teach them endurance as we consciously subject them to difficulties. This is actually one of the *Niyamas*

and is known as *Tapas* or the acceptance of pain as purification. Passing through difficulty unscathed teaches us that we are stronger than we know and invites us to move ever deeper into our practice. Work with angry determination to invoke this purifying fire. This anger is never directed at the True Self or at anyone else, but is like that which is expressed towards a child for their benefit, free of any feelings of hatred and passing almost as quickly as experienced. Also, remember that the effort involved in trying to achieve the full posture can be of greater value than actually achieving it.

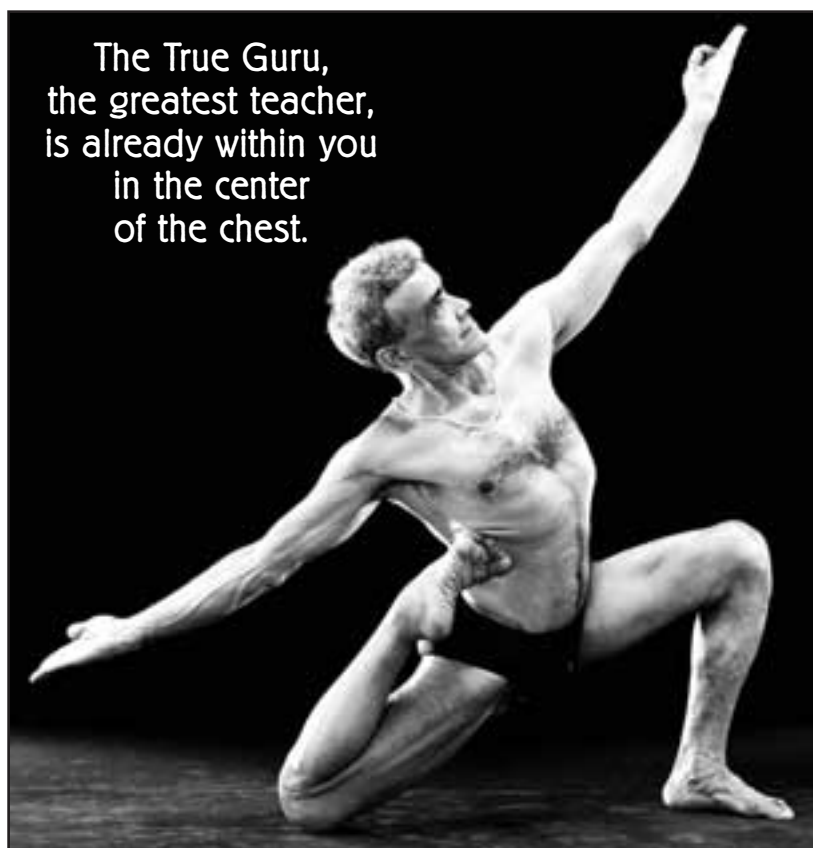
If we make every action an offering to the

within the *Asana* practice, particularly those postures which are done with the eyes closed and the attention firmly fixed at the space between the eyebrows.

To find many of these things, it is good to practice sometimes in the company of others and under the watchful gaze of one who has gone before you in experience and knowledge. Such a preceptor or teacher can be of great aid on the path which is Yoga. One can also learn much by watching others and imitating their actions both physically and mentally. Years ago my Guru taught only the main postures, and having learned them, I diligently watched other teachers at the ashram who were active at the time. If you see someone doing something your mind says you cannot do, realize that since what they are, you are also. If you try and imitate them, you will get all their tricks. It is also good to practice with others sometimes as you develop common mind by moving in synch with others. Moving like this, as in a parade, everyone helps everyone else in their practice. Additionally, peer pressure invites the individual to stay in the postures longer, challenging themselves and, thus, making progress. If you are home alone, it is easy to leave off holding when the mind says it's had enough since there is no one there to see you break the pose.

Often I make corrections when one practices in a class. Always remember

that I am only correcting the mind and body in order for you to make progress a little faster. After all, if the posture looks strange, you feel strange. The “Real You” is already perfect and needs no correction, but sometimes correcting at the grossest (physical) level can be of great help in every other aspect of practice. When a student first comes to me, I will give them a lot of help if they need it. Then I leave them alone for a while so that they can begin to feel out, and find their own way. If after a few weeks they are getting no-where, I will give them some additional help.



Supreme Self, the *Asana* practice can become Karma Yoga or selfless or actionless action since by offering up the result or fruit of each action, we have moved beyond acting with any expectation of result. Doing so, the practice of posture becomes like a flowing, physicalized act of devotion. Acting or non-acting in this way, we also act according to the final *Niyama* of *Isvara Pranidhana* or surrender to the Almighty One. Surrender to free yourself. Surrender and you will experience a release within each posture that will allow you to begin to taste meditation right there

Imagination is so crucial to the practice of Yoga and *Asana* in particular. Most everything you see someone else do, you may achieve through dedication and regular practice combined with adherence to a moderate vegetarian diet and strict observance of *Yama* and *Niyama*. True progress in *Asana* practice is achieved by advancing slowly and steadily according to your capacity each day. Sometimes, advance according to "No pain, no gain." Other times be perceptive and sensitive enough to yourself to advance according to "No pain, no strain." When one ultimately achieves the full posture, one is able to rest in effortlessness, and begin to taste a little the sweetness of the settling of the mind. Practice regularly the main postures, and if time permits, hold them for a long time. This is the true secret to making progress. Always remember that the True Guru, the greatest teacher, is already within you in the center of the chest, the right side of the heart as the "Real You." Seek ever to move deep within the cave of yourself and find out who you really are. It is in this place that you will discover the answer to every question and really begin to make progress in the truth that is Yoga.

Legendary "Teacher's Teacher," Yoga Master Sri Dharma Mittra, now 71, is one of the first independent Yoga teachers in the United States. He is known as the "Rock of Yoga." Founder of the Dharma Yoga Center in 1974, he is the author of *The Master Yoga Chart*. Sri Dharma still teaches daily at 12pm and 6:30pm at the Dharma Yoga Center, located at 297 Third Avenue at 23rd Street in New York City. Come by for a special two or three hour treat with Sri Dharma or a Free Trial Dharma I or II class with this article. Go to www.dharmayogacenter.com for full class and retreat schedule. Call 212-889-8160 for information.



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