

Annette Kerckhoff

The Personal Yoga Practice:

**A guide for students who are starting to work one-on-one with their
teacher**

By Annette Kerckhoff PhD

Submitted as the final requirement in the KHYF Yoga Therapy Training

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St. K. ...

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An Opening Word to the Jury

I am presenting this paper to the members of the KHYF Yoga Therapy Program's jury as the final step in fulfilling the requirements for certification. When Kausthub Desikachar described the different options we had for our project, either doing scientific research or writing a paper, I chose to write a paper for two main reasons.

First, I am not a qualified researcher and have no existing connections to the field of scientific research in my geographical area. What's more, the potential for scientific work on yoga in Quebec, Canada needs to be developed carefully at this stage. In the province of Quebec, yoga has not yet been integrated into our social and legal structures, meaning that as an approach to health, it sits in a grey zone where it is neither legal nor illegal. The established Medical Order currently tolerates it, but at the first sign of malpractice, there will be lawsuits. This is why I feel the need to introduce my work as a yoga therapist prudently. I recognize the value and importance of scientific research in our field and I hope that it will eventually become part of my professional activities. Through articles, interviews and word of mouth, I have begun planting seeds for this to happen in years to come.

The second reason for writing this paper is for education purposes, a key part of the process of introducing individualized yoga in my setting. There are false ideas here around yoga's potential as a tool for prevention of illness and for healing, and although group classes are popular and even recommended at times by main stream health professionals, personalized yoga classes are virtually unknown and when someone does hear about them, the goals, tools and framework are often not well understood. The idea of writing a text about the personalized path of yoga came to me years ago, pretty much at the outset of my work with individuals, and when Kausthub presented the requirement of completing a project for the KHYF Yoga Therapy Program, I knew right away that I would now have the opportunity to bring my text to fruition.

What follows is an introduction to the personalized path of yoga. As opposed to TKV Deşikachar's major work, The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice¹, which gives in-depth philosophical teachings and actual technical knowledge on how to practice yoga, my paper explores the history of yoga, some key definitions of yoga and also some aspects of what a personal yoga practice can do for the student, always linking the information given to what it means to the student as they prepare to meet with a teacher. I have chosen to focus on simply setting the stage. Whenever possible, the text is written in the second person, as though I was speaking directly to the reader in order to make the tone of the text more personal; this is an attempt at giving the future student a taste of what it might be like to have the full attention of their teacher. At times, I have also tried to lighten the experience of reading and of preparing for the personalized approach through humor, enthusiasm and vulgarization of concepts, strategies that hopefully will make the process of working alone with a yoga teacher appear less daunting and more accessible, even inviting.

Feedback about my project from my students gives me the assurance that this text will be welcomed with enthusiasm; I sincerely hope that my choice to present it as a project for completion of the yoga therapy program will be understood and appreciated by the KHYF jury members.

Since the foundation of my project is highly experiential and personal, literally an offering as an experienced Western yoga teacher to my student, it does not lend itself to a formal literature review. Above, I situated my work with respect to The Heart of Yoga and in the last pages of this document, I have included a bibliography and an acknowledgement of my personal yoga practice, teachers and trainers.

¹ Deşikachar, TKV. The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice. (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1995.)

Introduction

The goal of this text is to help you prepare for the work of establishing a personal yoga practice with the help of a qualified teacher.

Traditionally in India, yoga is taught in group classes to children and one-on-one to adults. This is for several reasons. In order to get children to do yoga, it needs to be fun and social and children's yoga classes are quite like a game or an adventure. What's more, children are very flexible: their joints are still soft and rubbery allowing them to safely try many different postures. Once we reach adulthood, we have each collected unique experiences (both constructive but also some hurtful), our joints have stiffened and our bodies have been shaped by experiences and daily gestures. Our goals and needs have become clearer and our beliefs and values have taken on personal dimensions. The framework of an individual yoga class allows for personalization at all of these levels, making it safer and more fitting for the deep and precise application of yoga as a technique for healing, personal transformation and spiritual growth for adults. *Imp*

In the West today, yoga is most often taught in group classes and this form serves some of our needs nicely. Group classes are efficient at a certain level because they allow several people at once to get a taste of yoga. In a world where people are more and more isolated, a group setting brings like-minded people together. It is clear that many find the guidance of a teacher and the presence of fellow students far more motivating for practice than the sight of their own mat opened up on their living room floor. Yes, group classes are here to stay!

There are also drawbacks and very real limitations to the group yoga class. Perhaps most important of all is that the teacher-student relationship is diluted and this creates a serious barrier for the teacher's ability to perceive the student's needs and responses to the different techniques taught. Even just trying to hear the quality of a specific student's breathing can be a challenge; how could a teacher possibly hear 15 people's breathing at once? This is important information that she is not getting and so her ability to guide each person with finesse is definitely hindered.

Furthermore, when deciding what to teach, a group yoga teacher needs to make some tough choices: some of her students would benefit more from stimulating techniques while others from more soothing ones; some might need to work on improving the mobility of the upper back while the priority for others is possibly low back flexibility; some might draw strength from a personal connection to God while others have resistance to the concept. It simply is a fact that the full potential of the tools of yoga cannot blossom in a group class setting. I once heard TKV Desikachar say: "The more people there are, the more water we must add to the soup". Here is a parallel: try writing a sincere and personal love letter to 15 individuals at the same time; you might get across your good intentions, but you won't touch everyone's heart.

Unfortunately, it must be added that in many cases in the West, neither yoga teachers nor their trainers actually have the training necessary for the development of a refined personal yoga practice. Why? Group classes are much more popular, so we've been focusing on the basics. Qualified trainers are rare. The path to becoming a highly qualified yoga teacher is costly financially but also on the level of commitment: it takes a minimum of 2000 hours of training (presently, most teacher trainings are given through a curriculum of 200 to 500 hours), a lot of practice and then continued education is also required. Perhaps an even tougher demand is the fact that, in order to be able to guide others through the challenging transformations that happen on the yogic path, the teacher needs to be living the personal transformations himself. He needs time, space, strength and guidance to truly change and these are rare commodities in the modern world.

T. Krishnamacharya taught that function is more important than form and this is a key concept to understand in the outset of this text, because it the reason for personalizing yoga practices. The great master demonstrated that each yogic technique aims to create or improve a specific function in the person, for example, each yogic posture works on a function or a combination of functions in the spine, be it lengthening, flexion, extension, twisting, lateral bending or inversion. In the same way, he presented techniques of breathing, chanting, relaxation and meditation as ways of bringing out different aspects of a person's health. When teaching yoga, he gave tools to an individual because he was able to see in that person that they improved his or her functioning in life. If you have done some learning in a different tradition, you may

perceive yoga as a set of formal techniques that you should copy from your teacher or from a book; if this is the case, please learn to let go of your attachment to form as you adjust to the personalized approach. Function is at the heart of individualized classes, not form and it will be the job of your teacher to build correct function into your practice. Different traditions of yoga possibly embrace the concept of a personalized yoga practice, but currently teachers trained in the Tradition of T. Krishnamacharya seem to be leading the way.² It is important to state that my training as a yoga therapist is in the Tradition of T. Krishnamacharya and thus a large portion of the information shared here comes from this background.

So a personalized approach to yoga presents itself to us in the West as something new. This newness is precisely what has prompted me to write this paper.

In teaching my students one-on-one, I find that I spend time explaining to them what this approach is all about, how I work, what sorts of tools I use, the information I need in order to be able to guide them, what they can expect from the practice, what they need to do to make it work, etc. When I don't have the opportunity to make these things clear, I have noticed that the process is compromised, perhaps because the student was expecting something else or was not properly prepared. I believe this text can do a better job at setting the stage for the development of a personal yoga practice than what I attempt to do in person at a first meeting.

To start, I present a brief history of yoga, followed by different definitions of yoga coming from classical references in Indian philosophy and supported by stories and comments shared by our very own home-grown yoga practitioners, North American yoga pioneers who are already practicing yoga in this "new" way. In order to collect accounts from them, I sent out a survey to the North American KHYF Yahoo Group as well as to my current students and got responses from 27 yoga practitioners who are actively maintaining a personalized yoga practice

² It is interesting to note that during a search for "personal yoga practice" on Google in December of 2011, there were only two results on the first page that actually were about teachers offering a truly personalized yoga practice and both teachers were trained in the Tradition of T. Krishnamacharya : Kevin Kortan in the USA (<http://www.evolutionaryyoga.com/kevin.htm> 12.12.2011) and Saraswathi Vasudevan in India (<http://yogavahini.com/founder.html> 12.12.2011). The other results were for videos and books that are obviously not able to work with a student in an authentically personalized way.

in the Tradition of T. Krishnamacharya. The survey is included in Appendix "A". I promised them that their words would be used anonymously, so I have quoted them in the grey zones after each theme without naming the author, placing texts that pertain in some way to the theme discussed in the preceding section. Even though the questionnaire asked seven different questions, the question "What is yoga?" solicited the most valuable information on the benefits of a personal yoga practice and so I've focused on sharing these answers.

History of yoga

Vedic origins

The classical yoga of Patañjali finds its origins in the *Veda-s*, an immense corpus of ancient Indian wisdom composed in Sanskrit. Traces of yogic teachings are already found in the earliest *Veda*, the *Rigveda*, probably composed earlier than 1900 B.C.E.³ The wisdom carried by the *Veda-s* is presented in the form of hymns, prose *mantra-s*, poems and incantations. It is said that the *Veda-s* are of divine inspiration and that sages who achieved exceptional mind states through special practices and austerities “heard” them.

How can a Western mind relate to such an “Indian” explanation of the origins of the earliest teachings of yoga? Perhaps you might think of an experience you have had in nature.

Have you ever started out on a stroll in the woods with a pre-occupied mind, where unresolved issues made your mind chat away to itself, or to the poor person walking beside you? Was there a special moment during the walk where you saw something like a particular root and suddenly thought to yourself: “Get grounded! You’re thinking of all sorts of scenarios that probably will never take place.” Or perhaps you spotted a bird flying from one branch to another in the middle of a cold and snowy winter and heard yourself thinking: “Little bird, you don’t even know where your next meal will come from and here you are chirping away and moving with confidence. Yes, I need to learn to trust in Life!” Or maybe you were sitting and contemplating a sunset somewhere and that special moment allowed to really let go of someone, or of something. It is true that we “hear” wisdom when we are able to quiet down the mind, isn’t it? OK, it might not be poetry that will inspire humankind for centuries like the *Veda-s*! But it is our own modest, punctual and personal wisdom. Yoga comes from inside, and this means that you too can hope to eventually link to the source of the teachings in your own way.

³ Feuerstein, Georg. *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*. (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998) 130-140.

Yoga is one of the six *darśana*

Do you get the feeling at times of being disconnected? Disconnected from something that might even be hard to pin point: yourself, your deepest feelings and motivations, your inner clarity, your Essence? This feeling is as old as human presence on earth and it led to the creation of yoga as an official system in Indian thought.

Darśana means “vision” or “worldview”. Indian wisdom progressively developed through time around six *darśana-s*, or major schools of thought, each school offering a path to come out of suffering. Somewhere between 200 BC and 500 AD, Patañjali compiled the *Yoga-sūtra* and yoga entered its classical age, officially taking its place amongst the *darśana*. The other world views are *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*, *Mimāṃsa*, *Vedānta*, and *Samkhya*. Let’s get a glimpse of each of the six *darśana-s* in order to begin to imagine how each system proposes to come out of suffering. Perhaps you will see more clearly why you are drawn to the *yoga darśana*!

The two schools of *Mimāṃsa* and *Vedānta* are paired together. In the school of *Mimāṃsa*, it is believed that we suffer because our actions are imperfect: we most often act from a place of mental agitation and are inspired by ego. If we can clear our mind and perfect our actions through the practice of sacred rituals, then we will come out of suffering.

The school of *Vedānta* is non-dualistic and it is believed that we suffer because we are in a state of confusion. We are unaware of our connection with the Absolute. Through different practices including *mantrajapa*, the recitation of formulas that clear the mind, we can awaken to our link to *Brahman*, the Source, and come out of suffering.

Nyāya and *Vaiśeṣika* are paired together because they have certain aspects in common. In the school of thought called *Nyāya*, it is believed that we suffer because we have not properly understood the relationship between cause and effect. If we work on clearer perception, perception from a perfectly focused mind that is connected to its Essence, then we will no longer make the mistakes based on misunderstanding that lead us constantly to more and more suffering.

In the school of *Vaiśeṣika*, it is believed that we suffer because we are not living in harmony with the cycle of creation and dissolution. Once again, if we can improve our perception of the evolution of matter, we will live in harmony and no longer suffer.

Samkhya is the philosophical partner of *Yoga*. The former is often presented as being more theoretical and the latter more practical. Both aim to distinguish between that which changes and that which is stable. The schools say that we suffer because our mind is constantly searching to connect with *puruṣa*, our Essence, but because of all the information that comes in through the senses it connects mistakenly with *prakṛti*, that which changes constantly: food, alcohol, a person, an activity and so on. This is called *pariṇāma vāda*, the changing perspective and it is the source of our suffering; we keep trying to connect with some dimension of our lives, but because matter, people, feelings and thoughts are constantly changing, the connection slips away leaving us with the feeling of disconnection. Through the practice of yoga, we eventually come to know a stable inner core or *puruṣa*; this is the ultimate goal of yoga. Once we can begin to experience true connection with our Essence, we achieve Liberation from suffering; this is called *sat vāda*, “the perspective of clarity”. One of the key differences between *Samkhya* and *Yoga* is that the former leaves no place for the existence of God, whereas the latter does, but without making it a keystone in the system.

In this way, *Yoga* can be understood as a technique that helps develop a clear mind. You may have noticed that a focused mind is the mainstay of each of the other five *darśana-s*, making it a powerful ally no matter what other path you choose on the route away from strife. You’ve made a good choice in turning to yoga!

The legend of Patañjali

As mentioned earlier, Patañjali is the author of the *Yoga-sūtra*, the text that compiled all the teachings on yoga contained in the Vedic corpus and gave yoga the status of a classical school. This text has become the point of reference for all yoga practitioners, but not much is known about the author himself. We don’t even know for sure whether Patañjali was one person or a group of people; the task of compiling all the Vedic teachings on yoga is so daunting that the latter theory is conceivable.

Instead of historical facts about the origins of Patañjali, Indian culture offers yoga practitioners a legend rich in metaphorical teachings. It is said that times were tough, people were suffering and the ancient Indian sages no longer knew what to do. So they knelt down and prayed for help, holding their hands in *añjali mudrā*, a sacred gesture done by placing the hands together in the shape of a bowl. The answer to their prayers came in the form of *pat-añjali*. *Pat* means “to fall”, so the name Patañjali literally means “the one who fell into the sages’ *añjali*!” I love it!

As a solution to human suffering, Patañjali gave three major texts to humanity: the *Yoga-sūtra*, the goal of this work being to help people focus the mind and connect with their heart, the *Carakapratismuktah*, a text on Ayurvedic medicine, aiming to help improve people’s health, and finally, the *Mahābhāṣya*, a study of Sanskrit grammar, encouraging better communication. The sages were well served! When we improve our presence of mind, our health and our communication skills, we remove a lot of discomforts and difficulties from our lives.

The story goes on to tell us about where Patañjali came from. At this point, we plunge head first into Hindu mythology and so it’s time to clarify that yoga is not Hindu and it is not a religion. In fact, Patañjali cleverly recognizes in the *Yoga-sūtra* that linking to God is helpful for some yoga practitioners, but not useful to all.⁴ So all you non-believers please don’t cringe or flee as we meet up with Lord *Viṣṇu* in the next paragraph: see it as an allegory!

In Hindu mythology, the force that sustains the Universe is called Lord *Viṣṇu*. It is said that when *Viṣṇu* is resting, he lies on a bed made of an enormous, benevolent white snake who’s body is coiled and relaxed, forming the softest and most comfortable mattress. His large head is erect and curved over the Lord, shading him from all harm. This snake is called *Ananta* and he is the one who came to earth in the form of Patañjali.

⁴ We will see later that in *sūtra* I.23, the path of devotion is presented as an option and not as a compulsory component of the practice.

If *Viṣṇu* has chosen and kept *Ananta* since the dawn of time, then this servant has definitely integrated the *yama-s* and the *niyama-s*, the first two limbs of *aṣṭāṅga yoga* that will be defined in the next section. The *yama-s* and the *niyama-s* are a set of social and personal attitudes, of which the most noble is likely the attitude of service to a higher cause. In the case of *Ananta*, his proficiency is clear.

The fact that *Ananta* is the perfect bed for *Viṣṇu*, being both soft and steady, shows that he has mastered the technique of *āsana*, the yoga posture, because this is precisely the definition given in *sūtra* II.46 of the *Yoga-sūtra*: “*sthira-sukhamāsanam*”⁵. *Patañjali* defines *āsana* as having two qualities: *sthira*, steadiness or firmness, and *sukha*, softness or a pleasant feeling of expansion.

What’s more, *Ananta* is able to be both firm and comfortable for *Viṣṇu* under the sharp eye of *Garuḍa*, an eagle who serves as the Lord’s vehicle and is always present at his sides. What’s the big deal? Eagles eat snakes. *Ananta*’s ability to maintain complete focus on his job, even in the presence of a major stress factor, shows that he has also mastered the yogic mind state where concentration is complete, even in the presence of distraction.

Since *Ananta* has been able to sustain all dimensions of yoga, he has proven that he is a true yoga master, worthy of the incarnation as *Patañjali*. So, yes, the greatest yoga master is the incarnation of a snake!

Definitions of yoga

Introduction to *Patañjali*’s *Yoga-sūtra*

There are a lot of false ideas about what yoga is amongst Westerners. This is probably in part because the word is associated with many different things in Western media. When we want to know what yoga really is, the most reliable source is *Patañjali*’s *Yoga-sūtra*. It is said that if

⁵ *Patañjali*. *Pātañjalayogadarśanam*. (Chennai, India: Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, 1985.) 37.

something is mentioned in the *Yoga-sūtra*, then it is considered to be yoga; if it is not mentioned, it is not yoga.

The problem is that this text was written in Sanskrit about two thousand years ago, in a style that was popular in India at the time, but it is completely incomprehensible to the modern novice. Each line of text is called a *sūtra* and it contains a list of keywords grouped together around a theme. For someone who has thoroughly studied the text with a teacher and, in true classical style, has learned it off by heart, the *Yoga-sūtra* acts as an efficient memory-jogger. But this is probably not your case, is it? My goal in this section is to present concepts from the *Yoga-sūtra* that will help you better understand your personal yoga practice and get greater benefits from it.

Krishnamacharya taught that the four chapters of the *Yoga-sūtra* were written for four students, each having different abilities. Interestingly, Chapter I is not well adapted for the average beginner. It aims to help a student with good concentration, the kind of person who sits down to focus on something and focus he does. It is my experience that a lot of people turn to yoga precisely because they want to improve their concentration. The tools and concepts presented in Chapter II are much more useful for them, because it was written for the student who's mind tends toward agitation. In Chapter III, Patañjali teaches an advanced student about the esoteric fruits of the practice and in Chapter IV an even more advanced student about Spiritual Liberation. Since I am focusing here on helping you get started on your yoga practice, the second chapter will be the most useful, although I will use parts of the other chapters too.

Kriya Yoga

Let's start with the most basic teachings, those of *kriya yoga*. This teaching comes at the outset of Chapter II and can be seen as the necessary starting point for the student who's mind tends toward agitation. Patañjali presents three words along with the term *kriya yoga*: *tapas*, *svādhyāya* and *Īśvarapraṇidhāna*. They can be seen as the qualities required of you, the yoga practitioner, but they also describe the effects your practice should start to have on you over time.

Tapas

In starting a personal yoga practice, you definitely need to have *tapas*, self-discipline. It is the very first word of the chapter, demonstrating that you will go nowhere with this technique if you don't have some degree of willpower and self-command. Some of my students come to me without having practiced as much as they had hoped, and when I ask them why, they say: "But it's hard getting started!" as though I should recognize that they are in a tough place. It is true that an established routine is easier to maintain, because a certain amount of momentum is created by a habit. But honestly, getting out of bed early in the morning when the house is cold and dark *never gets easy!* I've been practicing for a long time and, on a certain level, it is still hard for me to get up and do my practice most mornings.

Where does *tapas* come from? I'm sorry to say that I'm not sure, but maybe this can help. I can identify some of the factors and experiences that contributed to form my ability to get practicing regularly. My parents taught me that the good things in life don't fall from the sky and that you have to work hard for them. Throughout adolescence and a good part of my twenties, I was a competitive athlete and training daily helped me to learn how all parts of the plan of action were important—every moment, every effort. At a time when I was feeling depressed at how some pretty serious childhood trauma had left emotional scars on me, TKV Deśikachar took me on a tour of the beach in Chennai, India where the poorest of the poor live in cardboard shacks owned by the mafia. I saw a ten-year-old girl who was about 8 months pregnant and I realized that my life could be a lot harder.⁶ Getting out of bed early is nothing compared to what some people have to push through.

When we speak about *tapas* in group yoga classes, I am sometimes brought to sharing with my students this simple statement: "You know, life is not easy." And I hear a silent discomfort in the room as though this was a revelation to some. Sometimes, I think that life in the West *is* too easy, or at least that we have a deeply ingrained belief that it *should be easy* and this seriously handicaps some of us in the field of *tapas*. I guess I'm telling you that you need to be able to give yourself a good kick in the rear end if you want to practice yoga. Do you have this ability? Your teacher will not be able to give it to you.

⁶ This same beach was hit by the tsunami of December, 2004.

When we do practice daily, we should eventually feel the effects of *tapas*: the reduction of our physical and mental symptoms. *Tapas* also means “purification” and if you are not feeling some sort of lightening of your discomforts after about three months of regular practice, then you should bring this up with your teacher. Sometimes the progress is subtle and slow and your teacher will be able to see it before you do. Sometimes the practice needs to be refined to make it more effective.

A word from those who are practicing:

Yoga is an art de vivre. A set of tools and values that cultivate inner harmony and that support the necessary process of purification at all levels from mind to body and at the more subtle levels.

Yoga is a catalyst for change. It provokes changes in our life style habits, relationships with others, and our selves as well as in our outlook on life.

Svādhyāya

The second word in Chapter II is *svādhyāya*, meaning “self-study”. It’s as though Patañjali was telling you that this is not going to happen all by itself and that you must be present, witness the thoughts and sensations as you practice as well as the quality of your breath, become aware of more dimensions of who you are and learn about how you can improve as a human being. Classically, *svādhyāya* was about studying sacred texts with one’s teacher, like the *Yoga-sūtra*. In the West, if this is not possible, our equivalent first step can be reading books on self-help and personal growth. Eventually a more in depth process through psychotherapy can be undertaken. The goals are to become proficient at recognizing subtle emotions and reactions in yourself and others, to improve interactions with others and to enhance your ability to come back to your center in the face of stress. When you see progress on this level, you know your yoga practice is on the right path.

A word from those who are practicing:

Since the practice of yoga necessarily brings on greater consciousness of self, greater respect of self, yoga presents itself as a tool for balance – the body and mind united – in the turmoil of modern life: it helps to stand erect in the storm and concentrated in the whirlwind.

Yoga is a process of getting to know yourself on all levels so that you can get to know the inner workings of your mind in order to be able to calm it. I feel like it's a process of becoming your own best friend. As you become your own best friend, you may realize what is beyond or the Source.

Īśvarapraṇidhāna

In India, most people are raised in a family where spiritual practices are commonplace. In the streets of an Indian city, you rarely walk more than a block or two without coming across an altar or a temple. While doing my internship at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM) in Chennai, I was fascinated to see how easily the senior consultant was able to get information about a student's belief system. It is my experience at home that many students are not sure if they believe in anything at all and if they do believe in something, they don't really know how to talk about it. At the KYM, the consultant would simply ask: "Which God do you prefer?" and the Hindu student would reply very freely and spontaneously something like: "Oh! I like them all! But I do have a special affection for such and such." I also witnessed Muslim and Christian students who easily communicated their beliefs. In the Indian context, spirituality is main place and this leads many Indian yoga teachers to translate *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* as "devotion" or "surrender to God"⁷ and it is true that, for the devotee, the yoga practice can become a place for personalized connection with God.

⁷ Iyengar, BKS. *Light on the Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali*. (London: Thorsons, 2002.) 108.

In the West, devotion is a fitting translation of this term for those who have religious beliefs and practices, but not for others. Does this mean that those of us who do not believe in God, or who have not yet defined our spirituality are unfit to do yoga? Not at all. In *sūtra* II.1, TKV Deṣikachar translates *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* as: “understand[ing] that in the final analysis, we are not the masters of everything we do.”⁸ For those of us who do not connect with God, it is important to understand that *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* is a concept. It plays a role in the practice of yoga and once we get to the root of its role, we can and need to adapt it to our own context. This is another example of the concept presented in the introduction where I explained that, in the Tradition of T. Krishnamacharya, function is more important than form. The term *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* actually appears three times in the *Yoga-sūtra*: once in chapter I and twice in Chapter II, its meaning changing in each new context. *Sūtra* I.23 presents *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* as one of the techniques of meditation that will guide the student with a stable mind to merge with Consciousness (*puruṣa*) and thus fully attain the state of yoga. In this context, TKV Deṣikachar’s interpretation of the *Yoga-sūtra* translates the term as “offering regular prayers to God with a feeling of submission to His power ...”⁹ Patañjali includes the word “*vā*” in this *sūtra*, a word that means “or”, as he does for the other six techniques he lists as possible choices for the practice of meditation, and he thus expresses that the path of devotion is an option and not a requirement for the yoga practitioner. Deṣikachar sees this as proof for the importance of working with the concept of *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* on the functional level rather than on the level of the form it has taken historically in the Indian culture as surrender to God. Deṣikachar thus translates the term as a sort of letting go of the idea of ego control in *sūtra* II.1, as we have seen, and as a “spirit of service” in *sūtra* II.45.¹⁰ Both *sūtra*-s in Chapter II are presented as requirements on the path of yoga and could become an obstacle for non-believers if they absolutely needed to understand them as surrender to God. It is clear in Deṣikachar’s translations that they can be interpreted in an open and conceptual way. By identifying the function at the root of the concept of *Īśvarapraṇidhāna*, the tradition of T. Krishnamacharya allows many non-religious people to feel safe and fully at home on the path of yoga.

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out

⁸ Deṣikachar, TKV. Reflections on Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali. (Chennai, India: Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, 1987.) 46.

⁹ Deṣikachar, TKV. Reflections on Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali. 30.

¹⁰ Deṣikachar, TKV. Reflections on Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali. 70.

The functions of *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* might be summarized as follows: an attitude of service can fill one's life, and since one feels connected to a Source of strength, one can more easily let go of expectations and accept the consequences of one's actions. Here are some examples of how non-believing students can integrate these qualities in their lives. Helping others can be a way of cultivating an attitude of service. Recognizing that expectations are frozen and dead thoughts can help one want to avoid them. If one is going into a meeting expecting something of the boss or colleagues, one can stop; take a few breaths and change for an attitude of discovery, openness and inquisitiveness. When one is stuck in traffic, it becomes clear that everything is not under control! Letting go is the attitude to adopt. How? By learning to trust in something: like the kids' ability to cut up some cheese as they wait for Mom or Dad to get home to make dinner, or by learning to trust in one's own good conscience to pay the massage therapist all the same, even though the appointment was missed. There'll be another appointment ... and next time it will not be booked during rush hour! An open mind and the desire to connect with your better side is what you need to bring to your yoga practice. Your improved ability to let go will eventually be one of the very pleasant fruits.

A word from those who are practicing:

Yoga proves to be an excellent way of connecting to Life Energy and of opening the passage to spirituality.

It is an approach that uses different postures, breathing techniques and chants in order to allow the spirit to connect to the body, to allow oneself to open up to the self and to others.

Yoga is remaining in my heart through all breathing, all thought and all movement either in my asana or pranayama practice or practical life activities.

Yoga is my link with the Source of Prana [Life-energy].

For me, yoga is a meeting with myself, a path where I progressively come to know myself, respect myself and love myself. It's where I get in touch with different parts of who I am. From the outset, I've been focusing on my body, breath and emotions. I've been giving them my attention and my love. For about a year now, it's also been about letting go into Life, into "That" which is greater than me. It's about working on letting go and about being fascinated by Life. The word "work" is important here because letting go is still far too often something I try to DO, but that I don't always EXPERIENCE.

Yoga is a path that takes us toward a deep, inner calm, where clarity resides, and thus peace.

Aṣṭāṅga Yoga

In the analysis of the symbolism of *Ananta*, the great white snake that incarnated as Patañjali, we touched on some of the limbs of yoga and I'd like to present them all to you in this next section because they help to appreciate the holistic nature of the approach. Patañjali introduces *aṣṭāṅga yoga* in *sūtra* II.29 of the *Yoga-sūtra* and the eight limbs are: "*Yama niyama āsana prāṇāyāma pratyāhāra dhāraṇā dhyāna samādhayaḥ aṣṭau aṅgāni*".¹¹

Yama-s and Niyama-s

I particularly value TKV Deśikachar's interpretations of the five social and five personal attitudes because they are practical in today's world. I will share them with you by simply citing him:

II.30 ahimsā – satya – asteya – brahmacarya – aparigrahāḥ - yamāḥ

Yama comprises:

1. Consideration towards all living beings, especially those who are innocent, in difficulty, or worse off than we are.

¹¹ Patañjali. *Pātañjalayogadarśanam*. 33.

2. Right communication through speech, writing, gesture and actions.
3. Noncovetousness or the ability to resist a desire for that which does not belong to us.
4. Moderation in all our actions.
5. Absence of greed or the ability to accept only what is appropriate.¹²

II.32 śauca – santoṣa – tapaḥ – svādhyāya – īśvarapraṇidhānāni – niyamāḥ

Niyama comprises:

1. Cleanliness, or the keeping of our bodies and our surroundings neat and clean.
2. Contentment or the ability to be happy with what we have and do not crave what we do not have.
3. The removal of impurities in our physical and mental systems through the maintenance of correct habits such as sleep, exercise, nutrition, work and relaxation.
4. Study and the necessity to review and evaluate our progress.
5. Actions done more in the spirit of service than for personal gain.¹³

These are the foundations of yoga. For someone who is not yet able to focus the mind, in depth work on each and every one of these attitudes will make a difference.

Let me give you an example. Someone cuts Mary off on the highway after a long day's work. If she responds aggressively and madly honks, waves her fists and follows that rude driver too closely just to show him that he's in her way, she'll be putting herself in a very agitated state of mind. There will be consequences for her, she'll be irritated for some time afterward, maybe she'll start an argument with her husband or child when she gets home, she might not digest dinner properly because she's upset and maybe her sleep will be disturbed. Even if she had a practice of postures and breathing, it would be challenging to pacify her agitation. Instead, if Mary could react to the aggressive driver through the attitude of *ahimsā*, she might simply think to herself, "Oh that man is in such a state!" let him in the lane in front of her, give him the space he needs and keep driving still in a calm state of mind, she would arrive home peacefully.

¹² TKV Deṣikachar. Reflections on Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali. (Chennai, India: Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, 1987.) 62.

¹³ TKV Deṣikachar. Reflections on Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali. 63-64.

Please don't underestimate the importance of the *yama-s* and the *niyama-s*. Would you build your home on a faulty foundation? Of course not. Don't jump steps in your yoga practice either, because there will be consequences. For one, your *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* practices will have to work on pacifying your mind due to the agitations caused by your weaknesses in the areas of the *yama-s* and the *niyama-s*. Pacification is nice, but you won't be progressing on the path of yoga. Let life's lessons show you which attitudes are key issues for you at this point. Start there. Bring them up with your yoga teacher. He's got all sorts of very practical tools to help you implement them.

A word from those who are practicing:

Yoga for me is a practice and a discipline that fosters self-awareness, mental focus, and detachment. The tools of Yoga (asana, pranayama, meditation) help me to live by the yama-s and niyama-s, and to achieve greater clarity about my relationships, my reactions, my decisions. It has provided me with greater calm, contentment, and tolerance. The work is life long, but having the tools brings me confidence and ease, even during times of difficulty or stress.

It's a way of approaching life by learning techniques that improve my breath, my concentration, my mind and my spirituality.

In my understanding, yoga is a philosophy, a way of thinking or reflecting that supports a very varied body of practices. An adequate practice can assist each of us in our quest for health, wellbeing, as well as for mental and emotional balance. In this way, yoga becomes a choice or a way of life.

Āsana

Today, this is seemingly our "favorite" limb! As Elizabeth de Michelis has shown in her study of modern yoga, one of the major developments has been a "greater stress on physical

practices".¹⁴ Even though most of us love the movement-side of yoga, we must not confuse the practice of *āsana* with sport, a tendency that is obviously present in the West. Most gyms offer yoga classes and many people approach yoga schools expressing the desire to get fit through the practice of yoga.

Patañjali to the rescue! The *Yoga-sūtra* will help clarify what this limb was traditionally meant to do for us.

Here's a shock: only three of the 195 aphorisms in the *Yoga-sūtra* speak of *āsana*! They appear in Chapter II, a chapter that presents the path for the student who has an agitated mind. This gives us a clue about the effects of *āsana* practice; it must be good for the unsettled mind. The exaggerated emphasis on the physical dimensions of yoga also says something profound about the state of the modern mind!

In *sūtra* II.48, Patañjali says that if *āsana* is practiced correctly then the adept will overcome dualities. This will make more sense if I explain that Indian philosophy sees matter (*prakṛti*) as being made up of three fundamental qualities, the *guṇa-s*: *sattva* or lightness, *rajas* or activity and *tamas* or heaviness. One of the initial goals of yoga is to progressively bring increasing *sattva* or clarity to the mind. If *āsana* practice results in mastery of dualities, in essence, it encourages the stability of *sattva*, helping the practitioner overcome the typical swaying of mind states between *rajas* or agitation, and *tamas* or dullness. The practice of *āsana* does in fact calm the agitations of the mind by grounding the adept's focus in the body through conscious movement and then rest; once the heaviness of the fatigue has passed, *sattva* may appear. Seen this way, we're after a pretty good goal in modern times; it remains to see if we are practicing *āsana* correctly.

Patañjali defines how *āsana* must be practiced in two *sūtra-s*, II.46 and .47. A yoga posture must be both firm and supple, *sthira* and *sukha*; an appropriate effort must lead to the release of resistances, which in turn leads to the expansion of awareness. This means that a movement or a position should never be so strenuous that you can no longer breathe with ease,

¹⁴ De Michelis, Elizabeth. *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*. (London: Continuum, 2004.) 188.

feel relaxed or concentrate on what you are experiencing. Yoga is a multi-dimensional technique – it's never just a physical activity – and the two qualities of steadiness and relaxation must be experienced at all levels: body, mind and breath. This is where some Western “want-to-be-yogis” go wrong. In our culture, we have the credo “No pain, no gain” deeply ingrained in us when it comes to working with our bodies. We tend to neglect *sukha*, the feeling of wellbeing in *āsana* practice. This is surely why the more physical approaches like Ashtanga Yoga are popular in the West. It is true that Krishnamacharya is the creator of this way of doing yoga and he taught it at the Mysore Palace in the 1930's. What is less understood in the West is that he taught it to children, teens and young, fit and healthy men. Pattabhi Jois who later founded the Ashtanga School of yoga in Mysore was one of the youngsters, however he ceased to study with the great master while he was still a young lad. The Indian sage Nāthamuni clearly states in the *Yoga Rahasya* that strong physical practices, putting the emphasis on *āsana*, correctly support the healthy development of a young person up to the age of approximately 25 years. He calls the youthful stage of yoga *Sṛṣṭi krama*.¹⁵ The sage explains further along that the “householder”, an Indian term that can be defined as meaning an adult who has professional and/or family responsibilities, enters into a different stage called *Sthiti krama*, covering the ages of 25 to 75 years: “For householders practicing the *Sthiti krama* of yoga, *prāṇāyāma* is most important. This is my (Nāthamuni's) strong view.”¹⁶ The point I am trying to make here is that if you are working full time and/or have family responsibilities, your responsibilities should be your priority. Your practice should aim to help you be as effective as possible in answering to your calling. *Āsana* practice is meant to help you maintain your current physical condition, unless there is a problematic condition that needs to be improved, and as we will see in the next section, *prāṇāyāma* will develop your abilities to handle stress with equanimity. These benefits will not be attained through a practice that you experience as excessive. In fact a consuming *āsana* practice takes away precious and limited energy from an adult's ability to deal with responsibilities with presence of mind, possibly contributing to unfortunate behavior such as short-temperedness, thoughtless reactions and aggressiveness. Such behavior leaves deep scars on loved ones; we can see that *āsana* can actually lead someone away from the *yama-s* and the *niyama-s* when practiced improperly.

¹⁵ Krishnamacharya, T.. Nāthamuni's Yoga Rahasya: Translated by TKV Deṣikachar. (Chennai, India: Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, 1998.) 101-127.

¹⁶ Krishnamacharya, T.. Nāthamuni's Yoga Rahasya: Translated by TKV Deṣikachar. 133.

Āsana is a tool for the body, mind and breath. The objectives of the technique go far beyond physical fitness. So yes, as a future adult *yogi* or *yogini*, you do need to want to do some movement, but hopefully you're also interested in the other dimensions of the approach, such as breath work, because this is most likely going to be the heart of your practice.

A word from those who are practicing:

Yoga is a practice that creates physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing through the use of tools such as postures, breathing practices, self-reflection, chanting and more. It ultimately helps us to know our self more completely and results in greater ease in our life because we feel better, act better and have better relationships. Plus, it helps support us as we face challenges and change in life because we know our self and aren't as disturbed by the changes that life brings.

It is a set of practices (breathing, posture, meditation) that one takes on to be at peace with oneself and to attain calmness.

Prāṇāyāma

This is where the magic of yoga comes from: working with the breath. In the previous section, I mentioned that one of the keys to doing *āsana* correctly is being able to breathe with ease. Ideally, we refine the breath progressively during the postural phase. When practiced in this way, the practice of *āsana* is a direct preparation for *prāṇāyāma* and this is precisely what Patañjali insinuates through the presentation of *āsana* before *prāṇāyāma* in the *Yoga-sūtra*. Yogic postures eliminate blockages in the breath, strengthen the muscles used in breathing and bring awareness to the breath.

Students often come to me with pre-conceived ideas about how to breathe properly, techniques that they have been taught or that they read about in different settings. There are many different ways to breathe and each technique has different effects. A singer learns to breathe in a way that supports the voice projection; in martial arts, a certain way of breathing can enhance the competitor's power; in psycho-somatic approaches, certain breathing techniques are used in order to help the patient express suppressed emotions. In each of these settings, the breathing technique will be different because the effect desired is unique. Even within the field of yoga, breathing can be taught differently from one tradition to another and this is due to the fact that each tradition has specific priorities. As you prepare to start your own yoga practice, it is important to realize that there is not *one* correct way to breathe and it is a really good idea to approach your practice with an open mind with respect to this dimension. Over time, your teacher will probably teach you different ways of breathing as you evolve.

Conscious breathing is a complex science and it is important to closely follow the instructions of a qualified teacher around the tool of *prāṇāyāma-s*. At all cost, you must avoid teaching yourself *prāṇāyāma* techniques from a book, or deciding on your own that you will now begin practicing a certain technique simply because you have heard that it helps with a problem that you are encountering. A *prāṇāyāma* technique was never developed for the treatment of a precise health condition; this is not how the *yogi-s* thought. Let me give you an example of how I decide which *prāṇāyāma* to give to a student. As I observe my student, I look for certain parameters and when a specific *prāṇāyāma* brings them out in my student, I know I have found the technique he needs at this point. This means that three people suffering from the very same medical diagnosis might each end up with a different *prāṇāyāma* in their practice.

The results of regular *prāṇāyāma* practice are motivating. In *sūtra* II.52, Patañjali explains that perception becomes clear; the veil that often covers your perception and leads you to make decisions that you later regret is removed. Yes, this is a huge benefit, but that's not all! There is a second fruit from this subtle practice. In *sūtra* II.53, Patañjali adds that the mind becomes more stable, enabling the student to concentrate and even begin meditation. This major change in the evolution of the mind's tendency is called *pratyāhāra*. Patañjali presents it as the fifth limb of yoga in the final two *sūtra-s* of Chapter II, II.54 and .55; *prati-* means "opposite"

and *-āhāra* means “food”. Normally, when a person is trying to concentrate on a task at hand, some sensation like feelings of hunger can become a distraction, impeding the ability to focus. In the state of grace where *pratyāhāra* happens the senses are attracted to the “opposite food”: the direction of focus, instead of the distraction. In this way, *prāṇāyāma* leads to a revolution in how the mind functions through the mastery of the senses. If you practice *prāṇāyāma* regularly, your mind will start to become a faithful tool for concentration and you will no longer be the victim of uncontrolled agitations.

A word from those who are practicing:

It's a way of approaching life by learning techniques that improve my breath, my concentration, my mind and my spirituality.

Yoga is the breath of life, a way of life and a state; a way of grasping daily life with discernment, respect and the ability to listen.

Dhāraṇā, Dhyāna and Samādhi

Chapter II of the *Yoga-sūtra* ends by promising you a revolution in mind state that is further developed in Chapter III. Progression on the path of yoga is not just linear and regression is possible, so please do conceive of what follows as a gradual shift over time. After months and probably years of regular practice of the *yama-s*, *niyama-s*, *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, the state of *pratyāhāra* becomes one of your mind's tendencies when you try to concentrate. It is at this point that you might start to experience even higher states. At the beginning of Chapter III, Patañjali explains what tends to happen next. As you keep practicing, the mind's ability to focus its attention in one direction will strengthen, taking you into a dynamic play between three states: *dhāraṇā* or concentration, *dhyāna* or meditation and *samādhi* or complete absorption with the focus. You could choose to focus on anything: a person, an element of nature, and image or a concept. I will use the example of an interaction with another person. In the state of *dhāraṇā*, the

mind is focused in one chosen direction, even though other potentially interesting objects are present. You are able to carefully listen to the person in front of you without the slightest distraction, despite the arrival of your friends. In the state of *dhyāna*, the focus becomes so strong that you begin to understand more about the person than what his words are telling you. In the state of *samādhi*, you suddenly get a flash of what it is to be the man in front of you because, for a moment, it was as though you became one with him.

These are the initial higher states that a regular and well-adapted practice of yoga will eventually lead you to experience. It is the starting place of the student for whom the first chapter of the *Yoga-sūtra* was written. In fact, in *sūtra* I.2, Patañjali gives a very similar definition of the state called yoga: “Yoga is the ability to direct the mind exclusively towards an object and sustain focus in that direction without any distractions.”¹⁷ So, I think it has become clear that yoga is a mind state and the technique was created as a tool to get a grip on the mind’s workings. ... We’re a long way from “yoga butt”!

A word from those who are practicing:

Yoga is the ability to pay attention.

Yoga is a technique that calms the mind. When the mind is calm, we are more aware. We observe our selves and our reality.

It is a way of taking the time to connect with myself in all the dimensions of yoga (breath, body and spirit). Yoga helps me improve my concentration, my general balance in life and the stability of my mind when I am preoccupied.

¹⁷ Deşikachar, TKV. Reflections on Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali. 19.

Conclusion

As you embark on a yoga practice, it is important to understand that the highly refined results described in the last section do not come quickly to most practitioners. The commitment to get to this point needs to be solid in body, mind, breath and spirituality and there are personal and social skills that need to develop along the way. This degree of commitment is tough to achieve in today's world, so keep in mind that there are many wonderful and motivating benefits right from the outset of the practice like those mentioned in the earlier sections of this document. In my experience as a yoga teacher, I have come to understand that most students are after the very basic benefits of yoga practice, or at least, life's realities are such that they are able to make the minimal efforts that will bring them the basic benefits, benefits that are already so nurturing that they cannot go without their practice! Through the inserted definitions of yoga coming from other Western practitioners, you probably got a sense of the diversity in goals and experiences for which the practice of yoga allows and I sincerely hope that you will also find your unique path in this approach. Remember that communicating your needs, thoughts and experiences to your teacher is an essential part of the process of establishing a practice that will suit you. I hope that the concepts shared above will support and guide you as you start working on your yoga practice with your teacher.

Bibliography

In addition to being inspired by the texts listed below, I developed the approach shared in this paper over a lifetime of personal yoga practice¹⁸ as well as through rich seminars and trainings offered by Kausthub and TKV Deşikachar, most recently, the Yogavalli seminar given in Chennai, India in November 2009 and the KHYF Yoga Therapy Training in North America from 2006 to 2011.

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¹⁸ I started practicing yoga in 1970, at the age of 5, under the supervision of a yoga teacher who came to our home in Toronto, Canada. This was my mother's initiative; she decided to hire a personal yoga teacher because she was always looking for new ways to support our family's health and development. She was a visionary, since group classes were not yet available in the city at that time. Thanks Mom for giving me a great start in yoga!

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Appendix A

Personal Practice Questionnaire:

Please note that your answers will be used anonymously.

1. For how long have you been practicing yoga in the form of a personalized yoga practice that was given to you by your teacher and that you do by yourself at home?
2. At what frequency do you practice?
3. Please define the following, based on your own personal experience and in your own words:
 - a) What is yoga?
 - b) What is a personal yoga practice?
4. Why do you practice yoga?
5. What helps you maintain your personal yoga practice?
6. What would help make it even easier to maintain your personal yoga practice?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your personal yoga practice?