



WHAT IS ASTANGA YOGA?

(not to be confused with Shri Pattabhi Jois' system of Hatha Yoga)

One may assume that Iyengar yoga is simply gymnastics and deep breathing. Asanas and pranayama, however, are part of a much larger practice called Astanga yoga.

Astanga yoga is the term given by the philosopher/sage Patanjali, about 2,000 years ago to describe eight limbs of a path toward union of the Atman (individual soul) with Brahman (universal soul). The practice of asana and pranayama are just two aspects of the eight limbs of Astanga yoga. The other six steps are: Yama (social ethics); Niyama (personal discipline); Pratyahara (sensory withdrawal); Dharana (concentration); Dhyana (meditation); and Samadhi (bliss).

Asana and pranayama are critical to the path because it is believed that mastery of the body leads to mastery of the mind. The intensity and depth to which Iyengar yoga is practiced on the physical level produces a shift in the student's mind and spirit. That intensity is due to the demand that the whole body and mind be involved in performing asana and pranayama.

Iyengar's method facilitates this process in the following ways:

Students learn to bring awareness to all parts of their body at once, thus the mind becomes alert, attentive and sharp.

Students learn to breathe smoothly, deeply and evenly, allowing energy (prana) to flow without obstruction. This allows their mind to become quiet, passive and receptive, promoting a meditative state of mind.

Through asana the student also learns about the importance of the other six limbs of astanga yoga. One example is yama, or non-violence. While practicing the posture parsvakonasana, an extended side lunge, the student may experience pain in the front knee and assume that the knee is causing discomfort. But in fact, the knee pain is the result of the joint being forced into an unnatural position due to inattention/weakness of the thigh and buttock muscles. Thus, it is said that the buttock and thigh "do violence" to the knee by being lazy. The remedy is to work the buttock and thigh correctly so that the knee functions properly, without discomfort.

Pranayama is a prerequisite for correct meditation. In meditation the mind is absolutely silent but razor sharp. Iyengar states that though it is possible to achieve a meditative state of mind by merely sitting and concentrating, in practice it is impossible for 99% of people. The mind is too subtle, cunning and restless to be controlled and made still. Therefore pranayama is recommended as a way to utilize the breath to still the mind. in action