

Stability

‘Stability’ refers to a state of firmness, though not necessarily fixed. It refers not only to the ability to remain steady and resist change but also to the mutable quality of being able, if disturbed, to resist the waves of change and restore matters to a state of equilibrium. As equilibrium, or ‘Samatva’, is an issue of central importance to Yoga, the quality of being able to rebound from insecurity to balance is important to Yoga practice. It is mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita:

‘Perform work in this world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself – without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat. For Yoga is perfect evenness of mind.’ (Bhagavad Gita, verse 2, chapter 48)¹

The postures mentioned in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika are mostly sitting or prone, but the Gheranda Samhita includes standing postures which encourage strength and stability. These are: Utkatasana, Shankatasana, Vrksasana and Garudasana. Each of these physical postures involve developing a sense of balance. The one-legged postures in particular encourage mental stability which in turn leads to that divine state praised by Krishna:

‘When your mind has overcome the confusion of duality, you will attain the state of holy indifference to things you hear and things you have heard. When you are unmoved by the confusion of ideas and your mind is completely united in deepn Samadhi, you will attain the state of perfect yoga.’ (BG, Chapter 2, verses 52 – 53)²

All one-legged standing asanas feed the brain’s ability to receive information and to adapt our balance accordingly. We develop this when we learn to walk, and the ability to develop stability not only in asana but in mental and spiritual realms is enhanced. We have postures such Virabhadrasana III, Natarajasana and Dandamayana Janusirsasana to help us develop our natural mind-body loop and so enhance stability. Closing our eyes in any one-legged standing posture further challenges us to withdraw from outer distractions to a place of inner peace and stability.

When we do Vrikshasana, or Tree posture, we can learn from the trees. If the roots of a tree are disturbed in such a way that their stability is threatened, they will adapt. Nobody knows quite how this happens, but tree-roots automatically grow out or down in whichever direction is required to off-set the upward reach of the trunk. By developing sensitivity in the feet we stabilise ourselves in the posture; and by using the abdominals mindfully we support the work from below and send our own trunk upwards towards the light.

‘Yoga Chitta Vritti Nirodhaha’: there are endless translations of these words of Patanjali’s but essentially they mean that the state of Yoga is attained when the fluctuating thought-waves of the mind become still. The very word ‘Yoga’ implies the means by which this stillness is obtained. The word ‘Yoga’ comes from the verb which means ‘to yoke’, as in the yoking of oxen together in order to strengthen their ability to pull the plough. Rarely is the ox

¹ Easwaran, Eknath, The Bhagavad Gita, (1986), Arkana.

² Ibid

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still, but their effectiveness is maximised by this yoking. Like the mind they would, if left to their own devices, never think of pulling a plough together.

In Yoga, as we know, we move from the gross to the subtle. Though Patanjali launches directly into the realms of consciousness, he does explain in the eight limbs the path of progression from the basic moral precepts, through the physical and mental bodies with ever-refining techniques to a state of pure conscious bliss in which the mind is disturbed no more.

Much individual peace of mind has been sacrificed to the perceived greater good of social stability throughout the ages. China is a good example: because 'China' constitutes such a huge geographical land-mass, the damage wreaked by civil war is something which all leaders have sought to avoid at all costs. When Mao triumphed over the Nationalists in 1949 he followed a well-trodden path to power: though he took a revolutionary route towards that power, once he had it he held onto the principle of stability at all costs. The cost was high: millions of lives were lost in the famines of the nineteen sixties and crazy campaigns of the nineteen seventies. But the stability of the nation was held to be the most important thing, and that is why today the Chinese are starting to rule the world.

In the chemistry lab, the word 'stability' refers to the property of resisting chemical change or disintegration. Again, this is not necessarily a positive quality: look at the global problem we now have with plastics. The ability to adapt, resist, rebound and to ceaselessly return to a position of stability – be it physical, mental or spiritual – is a vital quality in Yoga.

Samatha - Calm Abiding Meditation

'Samatha' means 'Calm Abiding', and is a Buddhist term used in every school of Buddhism. It does not exist in its own right: Samatha ('Calm Abiding') and Vipassana ('Insight') are two mental qualities which arise from the practice of meditation, and apparently the Buddha pushed these two qualities as the main means by which to attain 'Nirvana', or blissful detachment. The Mahayana sutras (texts relevant to the 'Great Wheel' way of Buddhism in which it is possible to attain enlightenment in this lifetime) always mention Samatha and Vipassana together.

Today we come across Vipassana meditation: Mr S.N. Goenka, an Indian man born in Burma who is the lineage-holder of this particular mode of meditation in the Hinayana way of Buddhism ('Small Wheel' – by which one plods away at the goal of liberation by repetition of mantras and other meditative practices over successive lifetimes). Mr S.N. Goenka has initiated the establishment of 10-day Vipassana meditation retreats throughout the world.

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Anyone can attend for a donation. One sits in silence for ten days, observing one's breath, thoughts, feelings and sensations. All practices are underpinned by a set of moral codes not at all dissimilar from the Yamas and Niyamas listed in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

People who have sat for ten days report that it is hard work. And yet the fruit of this hard work is Insight. Though Patanjali's system differs in detail from the practices undertaken by the Buddhists, many of the aspects are near-identical. There is the underpinning requirement of abiding by a certain set of moral ethics. There is the insistence on sitting still (Asana). There is the attention (Dharana) with which one unites with the object of meditation. In Vipassana meditation, the object is the breath; in Yoga, Pranayama practices are used to highlight the breath. The results are – if one is fortunate - Dhyana and Samadhi according to Patanjali's system. In Vipassana meditation, one may be gifted with Insight.

And the state of Calm Abiding attends upon every rung.



Comment from Hilary Macrae, Sanskritist: 'I think Patanjali doesn't really give practices as such, even though he suggests a method for achieving citta vritti nirodaha via the eight limbs. The nearest is the suggestion of japa of 'om' in ch 1. I suppose one could say that samatha is the practice of cultivation of citta vritti nirodaha and could be in the category of dharana or dhyana, which states he defines, but without describing how they might be practised. It could also be a samyama, where he does give suggestions as to focus. A condition of calm, or equilibrium.

An interesting article on Samatha: Allanwallace.org