

Duncan Peak looks at how, in today's Western yoga world, asana can be used as a vehicle for self-discovery.

Over the years of its evolution, yoga has undergone many changes to adapt to the modern world. At the forefront of those changes has been the popularity of asana practice. Asana practice has allowed influences from areas such as exercise physiology, dance, and alternative medicine to modify its original purpose of preparing the body to sit for long periods in meditation and opening pranic channels, so the flow of higher consciousness can occur. This hybrid breed of asana, often called 'yoga practice', is now used as a way to look and feel better, rather than as a doorway to higher consciousness.

Is this trend a bad thing? I don't think so. I believe it is a different, non-traditional pathway for ancient wisdom to impact on our modern world. I imagine most people would agree that there has never been a time in history when it has been so important to re-establish the morals and ethics of modern day living.

Internationally, as well as on our home soil, we are seeing many successful hybrid and freestyle approaches to yoga practice. Many newer styles of yoga use asana as a vehicle for growth and a way to further understand ourselves. Our physical practice is a mirror of our own reactions, allowing us to understand our

in-built conditioning. In this type of context, a simple yoga class can be used as a vehicle of great self-discovery and a way to understand stubborn mental patterns that create our samskaras. This type of work is invaluable to today's world.

So why exactly is yoga such a valuable tool for dealing with the stresses and pressures of today's world? To answer that question, we need to understand, at a physiological level, how prolonged stress negatively impacts the body and mind; and how yoga and meditation practice positively affect us.

#### **Understanding Brain Chemicals during Practice**

When the body is under stress, experienced in any form, it responds by secreting two major hormones: cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones relate to the sympathetic nervous system and allow the body to deal with situations appropriately; i.e. they produce the 'fight or flight' response to immediate danger. Cortisol is the major hormone produced by the adrenal glands that control many life-sustaining functions, including regulation of blood pressure, blood sugar, mobilising energy in the brain, and fighting inflammation or infection.

However, over a long period and when produced in excess, these

hormones have detrimental effects on our body's metabolism, often accelerating metabolic ageing by depleting the neurochemicals (serotonin and other biochemicals) that provide optimal health and cellular nutrition. This excess hormone secretion can lead to increased risk of degenerative diseases, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.

Too much cortisol over a long period of time, produced in response to high stress levels, leads to a weakened immune system, infertility, and decrease in memory and concentration. It also depletes serotonin production, the chemical that is responsible for how we think and feel. We must have enough serotonin to feel good and positive – happiness is intimately tied to chemical influences.

We need to manage this chemical balance throughout our lives. Similarly, we need to manage stress throughout our lives by being able to develop our instinctive non-reactivity or our equanimity. The alternative is that your body will slowly eat itself away.

#### **Electrical Patterns in Our Brains and Yogic States of Being**

Science has taught us that when we have a thought or experience, we have certain electrical patterns that can be detected in different areas of the brain.

# *asana*

a personal perspective



Not enough emphasis has been given by teachers and students alike to experiencing and embracing the awakening of a compassionate heart, an equanimous mind, and a joyful spirit through their asana practice.



Most of the time beta brain waves predominate; they are associated with concentration, alertness, and cognition. However – as you can imagine – at the highest, most rapid wave level, beta is associated with anxiety, worry, and unease. This state fluctuates based on external and internal stimuli; this is the brain wave pattern many of us practice asana under. At times, we are lost in anxiety about how long we have to hold a pose, or we are thinking about what could go wrong in the future. As any dedicated practitioner will know, it all comes up on the mat.

The next, slower brain wave pattern involves alpha brain waves. In this state, concentration is very easy. It is what yogis would experience when they say they are ‘being present’. It can be likened to the process of withdrawing from the external senses to one of internal concentration (pratyahara/dhyana). It is in this state of mind that what is called the state of super-learning and focus can occur.

The next level of brain waves is theta, produced during dreaming sleep

or a deep level of awakened presence. Theta waves are associated with increased creativity and intuitive understanding – what the yogis may experience in dharana/dhyana (concentration and/or meditation). In this state, the left-brain filters of the conscious mind – filters that are often self-sabotaging – are by-passed, making our ability to de-condition the mind easier. Modern psychology refers to this as an exploration of the unconscious mind, and uses cognitive behavioural therapy to alter belief systems and positivity. Best of all, theta is also a state of tremendous stress relief. In the slower theta brain wave pattern, the brain makes lots of relaxing endorphin’s that really do melt your stress away.

The slowest brain wave pattern is delta, the brain wave pattern of dreamless sleep. Generally, people are asleep in this state, but there is evidence that it is possible to remain alert – in a deep trance-like, non-physical state in which you enjoy a corresponding increase in balance between the two hemispheres of the brain, or what yogis experience in dhyana/samadhi (meditation and bliss).

### Deconditioning the Mind

The original use of asana was to prepare the body to sit in meditation for long periods and to keep it healthy and vibrant so that prana channels could flow freely. These days, asana is practised for many reasons, from increasing muscle tone and definition or becoming more flexible, to just experiencing a greater sense of wellbeing. For whatever reason yoga is practised, it is wonderful that its growth continues in modern times. Again, any experienced practitioner will admit that you can’t just practise the postures and breathing without a spark of inquiry being initiated. This inquiry is the doorway to greater depth in our practice and is what yogis refer to as swadhyaya or self-study.

Deconditioning the mind is an essential part of self-study. In modern psychological terms it is known as, ‘cognitive behavioural therapy’, or for ancient yogis, understanding vasanas (trace memories) that leave samskaras in your karmic path. This study is fundamental to our exploration of unity. A great Indian guru used to say to me, “Duncan, you did not come to yoga to learn anything new; you came to unlearn all those bad habits you have.”

Understanding our belief systems about others and ourselves is the pathway to reconditioning and, ultimately, deconditioning the mind. This is a simple process of asking yourself questions such as, “What are my beliefs about myself, my work, my identity, my life, my friends and loved ones?” “Are they true?” “How does this belief hold me back in areas of my life?” “What would be possible if I changed this belief system to a newer, positive one?” These questions are powerful tools to challenge inbuilt belief systems.

During our basic asana practice, we are provided with many opportunities to understand our inherent, conditioned personalities and thus transcend the ego over time. This process is at the core of most traditional teachings and it seems these days that science and modern expressions of yoga are also moving toward the same place – to tame the ego. Even though our asana practice is a quick 90-minute session three times a week for the average budding yogi, it

gives us time for self-inquiry, a chance to see ourselves clearly, and to challenge belief systems that have been created through years of conditioning.

*“To understand everything is to forgive everything.”* – BUDDHA

### **Medicine for Today’s World**

Asana as a vehicle of understanding and development is so important in our modern world. Sadly, too much importance and credibility has been given to students and teachers who can bend their bodies and presumably hold a wealth of knowledge. I’m here to tell you that you’re just as stupid the day after you put both your feet behind your head as you were the day before! Not enough emphasis has been given by teachers and students alike to experiencing and embracing the awakening of a compassionate heart, an equanimous mind, and a joyful spirit through their asana practice. Asana is a vehicle for this internal revolution so we can all shine brightly, regardless of how flexible our spine is, or how many books we’ve studied.

*“When you are truly at your centre the madness of finding fault in others disappears.”* – ANON.

Asana is like the Ferrari of our personal growth, speeding us toward an internal revolution that can bring great joy within. Even if you teach asana at a physical level and strip the class of the powerful philosophy that accompanies a great experience, it is still beneficial. But

happier, more pleasant person to all, then there is something going wrong. That is a hard pill for many of us to swallow. But if asana is taught and practised with the intent of using it as a vehicle of self-discovery, then we can let go of the stubborn shores of familiarity, to set sail for new oceans of hope in our practice and in our lives. Enjoy your practice. I hope to cross paths with you some day so that we can learn from each other.

## Asana as a vehicle of understanding and development is so important...

taking away the philosophy that encourages students to go deep within, to challenge themselves and hold themselves accountable, is like running the Ferrari on sub-standard petrol.

*“The highest form of maturity is self inquiry.”* – MARTIN LUTHER KING

If a student has been practising asana for many years and has not changed their perspective on life to be a

Duncan Peak is founded Power Living Australia in Sydney. He presents and teaches his Power Living philosophy all over the world. His aim is to teach yoga in a way that makes it more accessible to modern day living and to have an impact on the mental health of the people of Australia. For further information go to [www.powerliving.com.au](http://www.powerliving.com.au)