

SHAVASANA THE CORPSE POSE

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ONE OF THE MAJOR TOPICS OF YOGA philosophy – one that I encountered over and over again while working on my documentary film *Breath of the Gods* – is the eight-limbed path of Patanjali, otherwise known as the *ashtanga* path, from the Sanskrit words *ashta* (eight) and *anga* (limb). Patanjali was a key figure in the history of yoga. B. K. S. Iyengar dedicated a temple to him in his native village, and Pattabhi Jois named his yoga school the Ashtanga Research Institute in his honor. The idea of ashtanga is found in the *Yoga Sutras*, a philosophical treatise on the technique and goal of yoga.

Though attributed to Patanjali, the *Yoga Sutras* were perhaps compiled by various authors between the second century BCE and the fourth century CE and were at first orally transmitted. The verse on the ashtanga path reads as follows, in an impressive compound noun of the sort permissible in Sanskrit (and in modern German): *yamaniyamasanapranayamapratyaharadharanadhyanasamadhyostavangani*. It names the eight limbs of the yoga path: spiritual purity, bodily purity, bodily control, respiratory control, sensory control, concentration, meditation and enlightenment. This yoga path is customarily identified with the path of life: as morally good and physically pure human beings, we perfect our bodies with yoga exercises in

our youth, turn to our spiritual nature with respiratory exercises as adults, blot out the material world, and compose ourselves in meditation and submission in old age in order to experience perfect knowledge at the end of our lives.

IN THE FIVE YEARS I SPENT WORKING ON *Breath of the Gods*, I probed deeper and deeper into the practice of yoga, attempting to follow the instructions of Pattabhi Jois, Iyengar, Sribhashyam and my German teacher Patrick Broome. During these years a different interpretation appeared to me. Perhaps the yoga path is more than just the life path of each and every one of us. Perhaps it is also the path of each and every yoga practice and is traveled anew every morning. All teachers initially insist on the student's inner composure, whether in the form of sung mantras, as is common in India (though the Indians themselves never impose this on outsiders), or in the form of good resolutions or potent thoughts about someone dear to us. Identifying with the good at the beginning of a yoga lesson can easily be dismissed as a cheap form of indulgence, or at least as narcissistic escapism. But the philosophy of yoga teaches us that good thoughts cannot be without impact (nor can bad thoughts for that matter), even if they be but a few good thoughts at the beginning of the lesson. This, then, is *yama*, the first step on the yoga path.

Now comes *niyama*, the purification of the body. One example from the Krishnamacharya tradition is the *kapalabhati* exercise, where the nose and sinuses are cleansed by sharp expulsions of breath. Interestingly, the dictate of serenity comes at this stage.¹ It is not until the third step that we encounter what is usually understood by yoga today: the bodily practice of yogic postures (*asanas*) in both their static and dynamic forms. The original meaning of the word *asana* is "seat," and its function is traditionally to learn the correct posture for the higher steps on the yoga path. Only a body made lithe in the asanas is capable of maintaining an "at once firm and light" meditative posture (*sthira-sukha*). The fourth step is the fascinating field of respiratory exercises (*pranayama*), the most widespread limb of the yoga path after the asanas. They channel our awareness inward, where our consciousness now closes our senses to the outside world by means of a mysterious and little-studied yoga technique called *pratyahara*. Then come the purely spiritual exercises *dharana* (concentration) and *dhyana* (meditation), after which there ensues the storied goal of yoga, *samadhi*.

In the practice of yoga, it is the fifth step (*pratyahara*) that corresponds to the corpse pose, *shavasana*. Here the student lies motionless on his or her back and allows the bodily and spiritual

exercises of the preceding 30 to 60 minutes to work their effect. (In Western yoga studios this is also known as "deep relaxation," or "corpse pose," which can be most welcome after the often very demanding physical exertions of the yoga lesson.) Shavasana is the name of an asana; indeed, it is often said, to the student's confusion, to be the most difficult of all. But I would like to assign it, not to the asana phase, but to the later phase of *pratyahara*, for it is here that I learn to master the withdrawal of the senses – or, more accurately, the merging of my senses with the material world, so that they lose their intermediary function. This has been to date the most profound and mysterious of the many enjoyable experiences that I owe to yoga. It takes place in six stages:

SUBMERSION

I lie on my back, my arms alongside my body. Without making any adjustments, I adopt the position that my body has accidentally assumed. I notice how gravity does its work, gradually bringing all my limbs into a state of balance. "We should be comfortable in ourselves instead of making our furniture comfortable," says Moshé Feldenkrais.² I therefore trust that my inner body will shift inside my outer body until I lie "at once firm and light." This stage is not spectacular on a mat, for the posture does not admit much variation, but it is quite different on a bed or chair. At most it may even be possible while standing to submit wholly to gravity without falling down.

PERCEPTION

I wander mentally through my body, exploring its borders and drawing up an interior map. Do my shoulders hurt? Does my foot feel a draft? Where does my leg lie? Where does it not lie? Am I lying crooked or straight? What's the posture of my head, my mouth, my tongue? Where do I end?

RELEASE

I remove all tension from my muscles, my forehead, eyes, mouth, neck, torso, arms, legs. With a bit of practice I can even relax my skull and – most difficult

of all, and very prone to disruption – my thoughts. I probe further and further to the ends of my body, and discover more deep seated, older tensions that I can release, channels that I can open up. I encounter echoes of earlier decisions stored in my body. Here, too, form is what Theodor Adorno once called "sedimented content."³ It transpires that these fields or nodes of tension constitute my individuality, my history, that network of limitations that shape me in the full sense of the word and constitute my profile. By releasing them I abandon my subjectivity and, in compensation, partake of a still indefinite stream of the Whole. Is this letting go a form of going with the flow, of losing oneself? It can probably be felt that way. Here, in a microcosm, as with so many turns on the yoga path, it depends on our interpretation, and on our choosing that particular interpretation. It is I who experience the release as if I were being filled with an influx of nectar.

MERGING

Where I succeed in releasing all tension, the borders of my body dissolve. Outside and inside blur and coalesce. I merge with the mat, the bed, the chair. As on an old phantom photograph showing the same body in double exposure, I float above myself. What used to be my knee, my mouth, my hands, are now a single peaceful organism. And not even that, but rather a sort of force field in transition from the ego to the world. From now on I shall change nothing: any movement would be a superfluous adjunct on my part that would cause the flow to stop. I would then revert to the individual, and the dissolved borders would be reinstated in an instant.

OBSERVING

Just after a strenuous asana lesson it can be difficult to remain motionless in the assumed posture and to resist the tempting impulse to make slight adjustments. I have been perspiring, and the salt itches my skin. I try neither to block out the irritation nor to bring it to the fore. I observe it with equanimity, knowing that it is transient. And indeed, after a

while it stops trying to fetch me back: it desists and finally dissolves altogether. Thus I observe the coming and going of clouds. And each cloud causes me to sink deeper and to merge without a trace.

ENTRUSTING

In the rare cases where I succeed in bringing this process to a sort of conclusion – or perhaps I should say, to accompany myself up to this point – I arrive at a state of profound oneness with the world, a state in which I know that I am being sustained. Sustained by what? That is again an interpretation, very personal and probably nontransferable. In my case it is an image. I am lying on a leaf, perhaps a large oak leaf, in God's hand.⁴

AM I DEPICTING WHAT PATANJALI meant by *pratyahara*, the fifth step on the yoga path? In a literal sense, *pratyahara* means "fasting"; in Desikachar's translation it means "withdrawing from that which brings nourishment".⁵ Patanjali, transferring this concept to the relation between consciousness and the object of consciousness, defines *pratyahara* as the withdrawal of the senses from the material world. Our senses "no longer allow themselves to be fed by their objects" (Desikachar). To quote Patanjali: "In *pratyahara*, the senses withdraw from that which has hitherto been their object and assume instead the form of consciousness."⁶ This idea takes us to the center of yoga, the goal of which is to free our thought from the contingent world of appearances. In yoga, "under the appearance of thought, there is really an indefinite and disordered flickering, fed by sensations, words, and memory. The first duty of the yogin is to think – that is, not to let himself think" (Mircea Eliade).⁷ In the perfect yoga posture, according to Patanjali "consciousness is no longer troubled by the presence of the body."⁸ And his commentator Vyasa (7th-8th century CE) adds: "Posture becomes perfect when the effort to attain it disappears, so that there are no more movements in the body. In the same way, its perfection is achieved when the

mind is transformed into infinity – that is, when it makes the idea of infinity its own content."⁹

WHEN I MERGE WITH THE MATERIAL world in the corpse pose, shavasana, what does my sense of touch do? It marks a border that has dissolved. When inside and outside have become one and my senses are no longer focused because there is nothing left for them to focus on, what are my senses of touch, smell and hearing? Whether I hear or do not hear is one and the same thing. The senses are not switched off, as we are taught by a naive concept of pratyahara, but suspended. I direct them back, in Patanjali's sense, toward myself, while I myself dissolve into the material world. In other words, they assume "the form of consciousness" that has become one with its object, a consciousness that no longer needs the sensory faculties because it has itself become wholly sensual – and the surrounding world wholly spiritual. One of the objects of yoga is to probe, surmount and move borders on a daily basis. The mat is a trial battleground for life's struggles. What border is involved in shavasana? When we are young and high-spirited, we do not

encounter bodily limits and believe that we exist by virtue of our own strength. It is usually not until we are old and weak that we realize that the strength of our muscles, and of our spirit, only seems to stem from ourselves; that in reality we are guided and sustained in our every step, and were so even earlier when we imagined we were strong. The absolute feeling of being sustained is Death, and it makes shavasana indeed the "most difficult asana of all," being preparation for death. (That is the deeper truth in the name "corpse pose," which only superficially derives from the fact that we lie as motionless as a corpse.) In shavasana we practice what Heinrich Zimmer has called "unlocking the gate to the inner beyond"¹⁰ and learning that life and death are dialectically identical: a single and – as yoga can teach us – blissful act of being sustained. ❖

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¹ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series 56 (Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 52.

² Moshé Feldenkrais in a lecture handed down by Andrew Lutz.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), p. 15.

⁴ I owe this fleshing out of my picture to Jörg Splett.

⁵ T. K. V. Desikachar, *Yoga: Tradition und Erfahrung* (Petersberg, 1997), p. 177.

⁶ Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*, Verse II:54.

⁷ Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁸ Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*, Verse II:48, in the somewhat pointed translation by Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁹ Vyasa on the *Yoga Sutras*, Verse II:47, quoted from Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁰ Heinrich Zimmer, *Yoga und Buddhismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), p. 128.

"A state of unconsciousness enters in which I and the world disappear: they are no more. A state comparable to dreamless sleep is willingly produced: everything individually outlined as shape, everything transiently fleeting as process, dissolves and melts into its opposite, into something ineffable, shapeless, without process. That is the physiological leap into the inner beyond, into being that lies behind individuation, into being *per se*" (p. 129).



Dog resting in the warmth of a chimney on a slate roof house in Jageshwar, Kumoan Himalayas. Photograph by Robert Moses September 2014.