

Lesson 16

That which can be told is not the Truth.
That which can be named is not the Name.

Lao Tse - *Tao Teh Ching*

Bhakti Yoga (Part 2)

You should remember when reading this topic that it is only words. Words, no matter how cleverly woven and constructed can never convey the meaning of bhakti. Bhakti is an experience that you must know for yourself. If

you try to understand bhakti through words and concepts then you will miss its essence and merely become lost in a whirlpool of verbal ideas. You will delude yourself. This discussion can only indicate the direction of the path . . .

you must walk along the path and discover the destination for yourself. Bhakti comes from the heart, not the mouth or the head.

Bhakti does not only depend on the outer expression. It depends on the inner feeling. A person who quietly does his daily work can just as easily be a bhakta as a person who sings devotional songs throughout the night and day. Only the bhakta can know that he is a bhakta.

In this second discussion¹ we want to delve into the more fundamental aspects of bhakti yoga, especially the pitfalls.

Hypocrisy and self-deception

Don't become lost in false feelings or superficial showy expressions of bhakti. Don't try to impress other people with false displays of devotion. Only express and follow that which comes directly from your heart. Be true to your personality. If you feel no bhakti at the present time, don't worry, it is something that will arise spontaneously if you sincerely practise other forms of yoga.

As Shakespeare so wisely said: "To thine own self be true." This is important. Why express devotion to anything unless it springs directly from the depths of your being? If you express devotion without the corresponding inner feeling, then this is hypocrisy and self-deception, which are two of the greatest obstacles on the path of bhakti yoga. They are major blocks on the path to expanded awareness. Many people worship a deity, a sage or

their guru without the slightest feeling of bhakti. It is only habit, an automated action. Be careful not to fall into this rut and if you are already in it, then quickly get out of it.

Incidentally, faith (*shraddha*) is often confused with self-deception. They are totally different. Faith means belief in something which is yet to be experienced or known personally. This is not self-deception. It is merely accepting that there is a purpose to yoga practices. Faith implies believing that the sages, yogis, saints, etc. were not misguided and that they experienced something that is at present beyond one's normal experiences. So faith and self-deception have totally different meanings. Self-deception implies that one deceives oneself and in this way blocks out receptivity to new experience. Faith, on the other hand, implies, or at least it should, openness to new experience in the future. Those who have faith should take great care not to become caught in the web of self-deception. They must merely believe that there is something beyond current experience and that they are not chasing castles in the sky or empty myths. This is one form of faith. It is completely different from hypocrisy and self-deception.

There are many parables and stories that illustrate this point. The following are two examples: A wealthy landowner was performing ritual worship on the banks of the Dwarka River. The saint Vamakshepa happened to be bathing in the river at the same time. He watched the landowner and after a few minutes began to splash water on him. The landowner tolerated this treatment for a few minutes, but then became annoyed and shouted at Vamakshepa: "Are you blind? Can't you see that I'm doing worship? Why are you disturbing me?" The saint laughed aloud and asked him: "Are you saying prayers or buying a pair of shoes from Moor & Co. of Calcutta?" The saint then continued to splash water over him with even

greater force. The landowner was dumb-founded and humbled by this rude exposure of his inner mind, for indeed the saint was perfectly correct. He had been practising outward worship, but inwardly he was mentally walking the streets of Calcutta intent on buying a new pair of shoes. He bowed before the saint and asked his blessings so that he could be more sincere in his worship.

Guru Nanak once accepted an invitation from a Muslim ruler and his minister to attend a service at a local mosque. It was a large congregation and when the prayers were offered everyone knelt. Only Nanak remained standing and took no part in the service. When it was over, the ruler and his minister turned to Nanak and said angrily: "You are an imposter! You said that you would offer prayers along with us." "Yes, that is true" said Nanak, "I did promise to pray with you, but since you were not praying, how could I?" "Such blasphemy, explain yourself!" they cried. "Does praying merely consist of kneeling and bowing?" asked the guru. "No, of course not" replied the minister, "that is only the outer expression. It is the inner worship that is important." "That is exactly what I meant," said Nanak. "While the service was going on you were thinking of your mare and the birth of its foal. You were thinking that the foal might fall into the well." The minister bowed his head in shame. It was true. "And what about me?" asked the nawab. "Oh you were busy with the horse which your agents are purchasing in Kabul." The nawab confessed that this was perfectly true and the whole congregation was struck dumb with amazement.

It is so easy to fall into this trap. And the trap is not that you think about other things. No, there is nothing wrong with these everyday affairs. The trap lies in the fact that one can so easily fool oneself into believing that this is worship, or that this is bhakti yoga, or that one is an ardent bhakta. This is the trap of self-deception. It is far better to think of all these things while simultaneously knowing that the worship is not really an expression of bhakti. This is honesty and is far preferable to self-deception. In fact, a person who is honest with himself and his motives and who practises no yoga or follows no religion is more likely to expand his awareness than a person who

deceives himself while praying or performing rituals for twenty-four hours a day. It is the sincerity that is important.

Another trap is to attach great importance to empty clichés and generalities. It is easy to speak of God this, Bhagavan that, Hari Ram this and Christ that, and to seriously think that there is meaning in the words. Most words in this context are empty, yet many people think that their words have great significance. It is easy to consider oneself a great sage by merely learning the contents of various scriptures.

A good example immediately springs to mind, told by a visitor to the ashram regarding his guru in the Himalayas. One day, his guru was visited by a very learned pandit who had studied many of the Indian scriptures. They talked about many things, but the visitor was more intent on displaying his knowledge than seriously discussing anything. After some time they started talking about the *Bhagavad Gita*. The scholar immediately made it clear that all the verses and knowledge were on the tip of his tongue. With perfect spontaneity the guru said: "Be careful not to choke on it." In fact, this sharp statement almost made him choke, for his ego was very much deflated.

This story clearly illustrates how easy it is to fool oneself into thinking that one knows all that needs to be known, and this is an obstacle on the path of bhakti. It is important not to be intoxicated by book learning or empty, meaningless statements. Words only have meaning if they are backed up by personal experience.

Before one starts polishing the floors of a house it is first of all necessary to sweep out all the accumulated dust and rubbish. It is the same with the path of bhakti: first of all one must clean out all the dross. When this is done, then one becomes a suitable vehicle for the expression of bhakti.

Faith and bhakti

Faith and bhakti are different. Faith implies that one believes that there is some good purpose for doing something. That is, though there may be lack of personal experience, one has sufficient faith to accept that the experience does exist. Without faith we would be nothing in life. Without faith we would not practise asanas, pranayama, meditative techniques or any other yogic practices. If we did not have

faith that there is a good reason behind them, then we would never practise them. When practice is translated into experience, then faith drops away. It becomes superfluous. Faith is associated with the instructions of the guru. Without faith one would not follow his instructions. Without faith a guru-disciple relationship cannot exist.

Faith leads to the experience of bhakti. This is not blind faith, but acceptance that certain actions and efforts need to be done in order to tread the path to expanded awareness, to that which is presently beyond comprehension.

Faith implies that your practices of bhakti yoga and other forms of yoga will lead you somewhere, that they will not lead you into the depths of ignorance. There has to be faith that the path of bhakti yoga does lead to higher awareness and bliss. You have to have faith in the efficiency of the sadhana. Without this faith you would never do anything. The *darshan* (meeting) with a great sage or your guru will intensify faith, for you will see a living example of a person who has travelled the path that you are presently travelling. This is a great source, inspiration and intensifier of faith.

Dogma, fanaticism and indoctrination

The problem with bhakti yoga is that it can easily lead to blind dogmatism combined with fanatical enforcement of one's beliefs on others. This is not bhakti. Throughout history bhakti has been totally misunderstood and misapplied. Bhakti is the path of love and devotion, yet it has often tended to develop along the path of dogmatism and fanaticism. This is exactly the opposite of bhakti. On the path of bhakti yoga one can devote oneself to a specific form of divinity, any form of one's choice. It does not matter, but at the same time, one has to be tolerant of any other form of divinity worshipped by other people. Tolerance lies at the very core of bhakti yoga.

At first bhakti yoga involves focussing one's whole attention on the object of worship or love. This is the stage where bhakti can easily become intolerant and corrupted. This narrow-mindedness automatically disappears when one's devotion leads to expanded awareness and spontaneous bhakti arises from the very depths of the heart. One realizes an underlying essence behind all individual deities and comes to a point of understanding where one accepts

all these forms as divinity. This is the paradox that you must understand for yourself.

It is only in the early stages that bhakti can seem to be a form of indoctrination. But this is not the purpose of bhakti yoga. The aim is to reach states beyond indoctrination. The aim of bhakti yoga is to lead to something that removes present indoctrination and concepts and leads to perfect freedom of being. So let us not repeat the errors of history and corrupt bhakti yoga by making it sectarian and narrow. The aim is much higher than dogmatism, fanaticism and indoctrination. The aim is knowledge and bliss. Bhakti yoga is the means and bhakti is the experience.

The importance of no expectation

Don't expect anything from your practice of bhakti yoga. This also applies to any other form of yoga. If you practise asanas, pranayama, meditational practices and so forth, try not to expect anything. It is a strange thing that the more one expects, the less one will receive. This is because expectation implies ego and the greater the ego, the less one will make progress in yoga. This is very important. So in bhakti, don't expect anything in return for your feeling of bhakti. Merely project your devotion without expectation. This is not easy, but try. This point is clearly explained in many scriptures. The following are a few examples: "My devotee desires nothing, not even transcendence if offered to him by Me, for desirelessness is the most direct route to liberation." These are the words of Krishna in the *Uddhava Gita* of the *Srimad Bhagavatam*.

In the same text, it is also said: "I am ever present with him who is devoid of all expectation, who is given to contemplation on Me, who is serene, free from hatred and sees Me everywhere." In the *Uddhava Gita*, expectation is also related to the three basic modes of nature: sattwa, rajas and tamas. It says: "Worship of Me without expectation of reward is sattwic (purified aspect of nature); that done with expectation is rajasic (active and passionate aspect of nature); whereas that done with the intention of harming others is tamasic (inert or dark aspect of nature)." Lack of expectation is important, but it is not easy. If you have expectations, don't worry. These will automatically disappear as you progress along the path of bhakti yoga.

This non-expectation also applies in everyday life. If you help someone, don't expect thanks. You don't deserve it. You should actually thank them, for they have given you an opportunity to help them. They have given you a chance to serve them, so thank them and don't expect praise.

This world is a playground, a school where you can learn about yourself, where you can recognize and eradicate your imperfections and problems. Every person and everything is your teacher. Without interactions with other people and situations you would never be able to know your own hang-ups and limitations. Every second of the day you are understanding more about yourself. Sometimes this is obvious, usually it is less obvious and operating more subconsciously than consciously, so actually you should thank every person you meet for teaching you something. You should view every situation as a lesson. Though you may be helping another person physically, they are also helping you to understand yourself. If you help a person in distress, they are giving to you as well as you giving to them.

Non-expectation is a fundamental aspect of bhakti yoga. This was tersely stated by Chaitanya, the great Bengali bhakta. He said:

*I pray not for wealth; I pray not for honours;
I pray not for pleasure, or even the joys of poetry.
I only pray that during my whole life
I may have love and devotion . . .
That I may have pure love to love Thee."*

This is bhakti without expectation. This is the epitome of bhakti. We do not expect you to live up to this elevated level of non-expectation, no ego bhakti, but bear it in mind as the aim. Let your aspiration be directed towards this perfect selflessness.

Shattering the ego

Bhakti implies that you feel devotion. From this comes effacement of ego and from this comes expanded awareness. Usually love and devotion are associated with and dependent on reciprocation; one loves and expects love in return. This is ego-centred love, not bhakti. Bhakti is love that expects no return. Bhakti means not taking, but giving.

As one treads the path of bhakti yoga, self-interest automatically starts to fade. There is a

transformation into giving and more giving. Devotion increases as the awareness of the bhakta increases, as he recognizes and progressively removes his limitations and imperfections. The feeling of bhakti is intensified. The level of awareness is correspondingly intensified. The greater the level of bhakti, the less the ego. The aim is to reach a point where there is total identification with the object of worship. It is at this point that one can say the same thing that Hanuman (the monkey deity and the epitome of a bhakta) said to Rama: "O Rama, when I identify with my body I am your servant. When I identify myself with the individual jiva (soul) then I am part of you. But when I lose all these identifications, I realize that I am you." *Valmiki Ramayana*

Once bhakti starts to affect the heart, every experience becomes a lesson, a means to reduce pride and power of the ego. It is easy to attain some kind of success in something, work, study or whatever and think: "What a clever person I am." The ego is so easily inflated, but it is a strange thing that when one feels egotistical, there quickly occurs something which deflates the ego. That is, while one is wallowing in a feeling of ego pride, something generally happens to highlight this false sense of pride so that one realizes how the ego was playing games and how it overpowered one's being. On the path of bhakti yoga something always seems to occur to prevent this ego complacency. This is the grace of being a bhakta, even if only slightly. This is the way events seem to flow, continually knocking the bottom out of egotistical mental status.

Pride must be one of the greatest obstacles on the path to expanded awareness. There is a wonderful and very practical book called *The Dark Night of the Soul*, which deals with this subject in great detail. It was written by the Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross. He says that aspirants have to pass through the so-called dark night of the soul. As they gain some experience they become greedy for more. They become egotistical or think themselves more advanced spiritually than other people. They become caught in many ego traps. These are blocks to expanded awareness, and they occur in this so-called 'dark night of the soul', where one's imperfections are purged.

This false pride, although an obstacle, is actually an important part of spiritual life.

These obstacles are a form of grace for without knowing and facing these ego distractions we would never know their existence and so would never remove them. There would be no progress along the path to expanded awareness. It is during this dark night of the soul that one comes to terms with one's faults, recognizes them and takes steps to eliminate them. So these egotistical states are both obstacles and a necessary part of spiritual life. It depends on the point of view. In fact, St. John of the Cross says: "Aspirants are led into the dark night of the soul to be purified of imperfections. It is in this manner that they can progress further onwards." So in a sense, these feelings of pride, achievement, status, etc. are necessary on the spiritual path. It is during this dark night of the soul that one's imperfections are realized. This leads to more humility, which in turn leads to greater bhakti and communion.

Strangely enough, it is often during spells of this dark night, or during periods of spiritual regression or backsliding that one's bhakti can be intensified. One is confronted clearly with a block or a misconception or a strong sense of ego, which was not obvious before. One realizes that one has come face to face with a further imperfection that can be purged. One realizes how important it is to experience these strong ego feelings. One's darkness leads to more bhakti. This dark night of the soul eventually leads to more light. The ego is humbled so that one can know more bliss and harmony.

Summary

In this topic we have been concerned with some of the pitfalls of bhakti yoga. The aim has been to point out the more obvious and common misconceptions and traps. For this reason, this is probably the most important of this series of discussions on bhakti yoga², for without recognizing these blocks it is very easy to lose one's way on the path. Once one loses the way, especially with the more gross pitfalls such as hypocrisy and self-deception, it is very difficult to find the right direction again and to make progress.

Notes

¹ Bhakti Yoga: Part 1; Book II, Lesson 15, Topic 1

² Bhakti Yoga: Part 3 - Book II, Lesson 17, Topic 1;
Part 4 - Book II, Lesson 18, Topic 1

Asanas: Sarvangasana

So far in this course, we have described various types of asanas: those that twist the spine and those that bend the spine backwards and forwards, as well as standing asanas and meditation asanas, but as yet we have not discussed any asana which inverts the body. In this topic we intend to rectify this situation by describing *sarvangasana* (shoulder stand pose).

Sarvangasana has beneficial effects on the entire body. It drains stagnant blood from the legs and abdominal organs, thereby increasing the general health of these areas. It tones up the thyroid gland, which again has positive repercussions on the whole body. It improves respiration and massages the organs concerned with digestion, elimination and reproduction and gives many more benefits, which will be discussed subsequently. This asana should be an integral part of every asana program.

Many people who start basic yoga practices are instantly attracted to sirshasana (the headstand pose). They hear that it gives many benefits and therefore immediately feel obliged to practise it. Often they practise sirshasana for too long and their body is insufficiently prepared and full of toxins. Under these circumstances, sirshasana can do more harm than good. It is for this reason that we advise people to practise sarvangasana as a substitute for sirshasana. It gives essentially the same benefits and is far easier to perform. Furthermore, incorrect practice of sarvangasana is less likely to cause harm than incorrect practice of sirshasana. It is a good idea to include at least one inverted asana in your daily practice program, but let it be sarvangasana instead of sirshasana. This applies mainly to beginners. You can start to practise sirshasana when you have purified your body and developed more control of your body and sense of balance¹.

Definition

The Sanskrit word sarvangasana is made up of three separate words: sarva, anga and asana.

The word *sarva* means 'whole', 'all' or 'entire', the word *anga* means 'limbs', 'parts', 'organs' or 'members'. Sarvangasana is so called because it is an asana which influences the whole body and its functions. The Sanskrit name is perfect, as it exactly describes the fact that the asana affects the entire human organism. This total effect is achieved mainly by harmonizing the endocrinal system, especially the thyroid gland. This subject will be described shortly.

The most common English name of the asana is 'shoulder stand pose'. It has various other names, including *salamba sarvangasana* (supported shoulder stand pose) and the pan-physical pose.

The thyroid

Sarvangasana has a profound and characteristic influence on the thyroid gland. Because of the importance of this small gland, it is worthwhile giving a brief description of its anatomy, functions and relationship with various types of disease.

The thyroid gland is an important part of the endocrinal system. It is a small butterfly-shaped organ located just below the voice-box (larynx) in the front part of the neck. It has two lobes, each of which is about 4 cms long and weighing 10 grams. These lie on either side of the windpipe and are joined by a narrow band or bridge of tissue which crosses in front of the windpipe.

The thyroid gland produces thyroxin (as well as tri-iodothyronin), a powerful hormone that affects practically every cell in the body. Its main function is to regulate the rate at which food and oxygen are utilized by the various cells of the body. This is known as metabolism.

This gland has a profound influence on physical, emotional and mental development. In a healthy person, the correct amount of thyroxin hormone is produced and secreted

to meet his or her particular needs. This is clearly shown by abundant energy and the ability to work and play without undue fatigue.

If the thyroid is out of balance then it can secrete too little thyroxin hormone. This condition is known as hypothyroidism. It tends to make the individual sluggish and sleepy. All the bodily functions slowdown. The intellectual faculties are dulled. The individual tends to become fat, constipated, apathetic, and indolent. If this malfunction occurs in children, it can lead to dwarfism, deformity and a generally retarded mental development.

On the other hand, a malfunctioning thyroid can also produce too much thyroxin. This is called hyperthyroidism. This leads to a speeding up of all the bodily functions. A person with this ailment tends to be continually overactive, both physically and mentally, and is unable to relax. There is a general loss of weight, diarrhoea, increased blood circulation and respiration, extreme nervousness and excitability and often psychotic symptoms. If this malfunction occurs in children, then it can lead to excessive physical growth, so that the child becomes abnormally large. This has led to persons growing to heights of two and a half meters.

We have indicated only the basic symptoms of a faulty thyroid gland. There are a multitude of specific diseases that can occur, too numerous to mention in this brief summary. The important thing that we have tried to indicate is that disease can result if the thyroid produces either too much or too little thyroxin. For perfect health there has to be perfect balance.

Why does the thyroid cease to function correctly? There are various reasons. Some people say that lack of iodine in one's diet can lead to enlargement and faulty operation of the thyroid. An essential constituent of thyroxin is iodine. If this is not sufficiently abundant in the food that one eats, then the thyroid is unable to manufacture suitable amounts of thyroxin to meet the needs of the body. There seems to be a lot of truth in this idea, for in areas of the world where the iodine content of the soil is low, there are higher incidences of thyroid problems. There are various iodine tablet supplements on the market which overcome this problem.

Another cause of malfunctioning of the thyroid is bad or sluggish blood circulation.

This can be caused by a sedentary life and general lack of exercise. If the blood in the thyroid gland (as well as any other part of the body) is devitalized or insufficient, then it cannot receive proper nourishment and it cannot flush out impurities. It becomes ineffective and consequently the health of the body suffers. It is here that sarvangasana contributes directly to improve the efficiency of the thyroid and in turn the entire body. The inverted position of the body directs a good blood flow to the thyroid gland under the action of gravity. Furthermore, the curvature of the neck in the final pose tends to restrict the normal flow of blood to the brain through the external carotid arteries. This flow is redirected into the thyroid gland. Thus for the duration of the asana, the thyroid is flushed and nourished with an extra supply of blood, which helps to improve its functioning.

A third important factor in faulty functioning of the thyroid is emotional stress. Many people start to develop thyroid problems after they have suffered emotional shock or when their stress level in life becomes too great. The social pressures of exams, business, worrying about what the neighbours think and so many other factors of modern life tend to upset the balance of the body. The thyroid is directly controlled by the pituitary gland, the master controller of the endocrinal system. The pituitary gland, in turn, is controlled by the brain and the mind. Thus mental stress and dissatisfaction lead to imbalance of the pituitary gland, which leads to general disruption of the entire hormonal system, including the thyroid gland. It is here that yoga can again help to normalize the system and bring the thyroid into balance. Through all yoga practices one can attain deeper states of relaxation, whether temporarily or permanently, which helps to harmonize the hormonal system, including the thyroid gland. The body has an innate tendency to repair itself and establish equilibrium if, and only if, it is given a chance. It receives this chance during periods of yoga practices. It is also worth pointing out that sarvangasana is a simple and yet effective asana for inducing quick relaxation. It is for this reason that sarvangasana helps to integrate and normalize the operation of the thyroid gland.

Thus we can summarize by saying that the thyroid is a vital organ of the body. If it starts

to function incorrectly, then the whole body will also suffer. Sarvangasana brings about health of the thyroid in two ways: firstly, it directly improves the physical condition and functioning, and secondly, it helps to reduce excessive emotional and mental stress, which tend to interfere with its operation. It is not without reason that sarvangasana is regarded as one of the best of the yoga asanas, for its benefits are many.

The parathyroid glands

These four small glands are not so well known as the thyroid gland, yet they are also vital for perfect health of the body. They are oval-shaped masses of cells, each weighing about thirty milligrams. They are located outside the thyroid gland and have an independent blood supply. They secrete a hormone called parathyroxin (also called parathormone) which controls the calcium level in the blood. In this manner these tiny glands influence the growth and regeneration of the bones in the body. If they function incorrectly, then the bones can either become too soft or too brittle, either of which can have disastrous effects. Sarvangasana improves the efficiency and health of these glands in the same way as was explained for the thyroid gland.

The mechanics of inverted asanas

All inverted asanas have a characteristic influence on the functioning of the body. In order to appreciate the benefits obtainable from sarvangasana and all inverted asanas, it is worthwhile explaining the basic manner in which they affect the body. The following explanation is not intended to be comprehensive, for it only describes the gross effects. Sarvangasana and all inverted asanas have more profound and subtle influences on the human organism which have to be experienced to be understood.

Inverted asanas improve the blood circulation to the brain. This is a subject that will be discussed more fully when we describe sirshasana later on¹. Without a proper nourishing blood supply the brain cannot function effectively. If the blood supply is stopped for even a short period, then the brain quickly undergoes irreparable damage. The efficiency of the brain depends upon an adequate supply of blood. Normally, the blood reaching the

brain has to rise from the level of the heart against the pull of gravity. The heart is usually able to meet the blood demands of the brain even against this adverse condition. However, a short practice of any inverted asana injects the brain with an abundant supply of blood, and is assisted (instead of opposed) by the pull of gravity. This helps to flush out impurities and irrigate the brain cells, improving both general health and the coordination between the brain centres and the different parts of the body.

The master controller of the endocrinal system, the pituitary, lies in the brain and also receives an extra supply of blood during inverted asanas, helping to improve its efficiency and functioning. This, together with the improved operation of the brain in general, leads to greater harmony and balance in the entire hormonal system. Many ailments are caused by disequilibrium in this highly sensitive system, and inverted asanas help to prevent the occurrence of these ailments or remove them. This is a subject that will also be more fully discussed with sirshasana later¹.

Inverted asanas help to remove deoxygenated blood, especially in the lower limbs. Supply of blood to the lower limbs of the body is of course assisted by gravity. However, on the return journey to the heart the force of gravity tends to impede the blood flow, which can cause stagnation of blood in the lower regions of the body, resulting in (or at least aggravating) such ailments as varicose veins. Physically active people generally suffer less from stagnation of blood because extensive muscular contraction during exercise tends to encourage the blood to move upwards in the blood vessels. It is a type of milking action that slowly causes the blood to move upwards against the force of gravity. Stagnation of blood is predominantly a problem with sedentary people who do little exercise. The lower organs don't receive adequate nourishment; they tend to become clogged with devitalized blood and waste products; the legs become easily and quickly fatigued; the digestive organs lose their efficiency and so forth.

Regular practice of at least one inverted asana helps to alleviate this problem. The inversion of the body allows the blood in the legs, abdomen, etc. to drain freely to the heart for purification and eventual recirculation.

This means that the entire circulatory system operates more effectively. Blood that was previously inoperative in the lower limbs is able to supply nourishment to the different regions of the body. Furthermore, on terminating the inverted asana, revitalized blood returns to the legs and supplies nourishment that may have been previously lacking.

As we have already mentioned, the digestive system is greatly improved through the practice of inverted asanas. The main organs of digestion, such as the liver, pancreas, intestines, etc. are easily prone to blood congestion, which reduces their efficiency and ability to digest food. Inverted asanas help to drain this accumulation of blood, so that it can be replaced by a fresh supply of blood. Food is digested into the body by means of the bloodstream. Furthermore, nutrition is distributed to all parts of the body by means of the blood circulation. This is the body's transportation system. Without a good blood circulation, the body can neither adequately absorb nor distribute the food. All the digestive blood flow must pass through the liver via the portal vein. This organ is easily susceptible to congestion, which impedes efficient assimilation of food. Inverted asanas in general improve digestion by allowing blood to drain from this organ. This removes congestion and in turn encourages new oxygenated blood to flow to these vital organs, helping greatly to improve general body health.

What we have already said also applies to the excretory and reproductive systems. The organs of these systems are also liable to become congested with devitalized blood. Inverted asanas help to recirculate this blood, preventing and alleviating various types of associated diseases, especially functional ailments.

The respiratory and digestive systems are intimately related in many ways. Furthermore, it is the up and down movement of the diaphragm with inhalation and exhalation that ensures the abdominal organs maintain optimum health. This continual motion of the diaphragm (the flat muscle separating the lungs from the abdominal organs) applies a gentle massage to the liver, pancreas and other digestive organs, keeping them in good condition. This is one reason why abdominal breathing is so important².

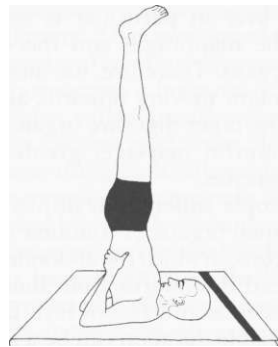
Normally the abdominal organs are below the diaphragm. During inverted asanas they are located above the diaphragm. That is, the weight of the abdominal organs resists the movement of the diaphragm during inhalation and assists during the period of exhalation. This tends to slightly increase the air pressure within the lungs during both exhalation and inhalation, helping to expand the tiny alveoli (air cells) in the lungs where the interchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide takes place. This improves the general health of the body for the interchange is rendered more efficient. The abdominal organs also benefit directly from this increased resistance during inhalation. The liver in particular is sandwiched between the diaphragm and the other abdominal organs. Therefore, the movement of the diaphragm moving upwards against the weight of the other digestive organs gives the liver a powerful massage, greater than it normally receives.

Many people suffer from displacement of the abdominal organs. A common complaint is visceroptosis, in which the abdominal organs are displaced downwards from their normal location. Regular practice of inverted asanas for a reasonable duration can be a great help in rectifying this type of ailment.

Inverted asanas have many other less obvious effects. They can improve the functioning of the eyes and ears under certain circumstances, especially where the blood circulation is insufficient. They can help to prevent falling hair and improve the skin complexion of the face by improvement of the blood supply. There are many other positive effects of inverted asanas, but we will not discuss them here. If you want more information you must contact an experienced person or find out for yourself. As we indicated in the beginning, inverted asanas have many subtle influences which cannot be easily discussed for they are more general. In particular, inverted asanas help to harmonize the bio-plasmic or pranic flow of energy in the body, which has repercussions on one's entire health, for this is the sheath that controls the functioning of the physical body. If the pranic body is harmonized then the physical body will also be in a state of healthy equilibrium.

Furthermore, inverted asanas, if done correctly, with awareness, induce tranquillity of

the mind, which also helps to induce positive psychological and physiological changes within the human framework. This influence, together with the physical and pranic effect, makes inverted asanas very useful for maintaining general health, removing or alleviating various ailments and generally improving one's sensitivity for gaining the most from more advanced meditational techniques. So good in fact are some of the inverted asanas, that many people use them as meditative techniques in their own right. Of course, the same can be said of all asanas, but inverted asanas seem to have something extra.



SARVANGASANA
(SHOULDER STAND POSE)

Stage 1: raising the legs

Place a folded blanket on the ground.
Lie flat on your back with both legs straight and together.
Straighten your arms and place them beside the body, palms downwards.
For a few seconds completely relax the whole body.
During the next movement, raising the body, the breath can be retained inside or outside; that is, you can either breathe in deeply and raise the body or breathe out deeply.
It does not matter, but you should hold the breath.
Slowly raise your legs by contracting and utilizing the abdominal muscles.
The movement should be gradual and with control; it should take at least 10 seconds for the legs to reach the vertical.
Keep the legs straight and together.
If possible try to raise the legs using only the

abdominal muscles for this action will help to strengthen these muscles.

If this is impossible, however, you can help to raise your legs by pressing the arms against the ground.

At the end of the movement, the buttocks and back should be on the ground with the legs pointing directly upwards.

Remain in this position for a short time.

Stage 2: taking the final pose

In this stage the arms and hands should take an active part in assuming the final position.

Elevate the legs further off the ground by pressing the hands and arms against the ground and contracting the abdominal muscles.

Raise the buttocks and legs slowly; don't jerk or fling.

Keep your legs and feet together throughout the movement. Eventually your back should be almost vertical, with the body supported by the two arms and hands, the nape of the neck, back of the head and the shoulders.

Transfer the pressure of the arms to the elbows and upper arms.

Then fold the forearms upwards, placing the hands on the back and side of the chest.

Gently push the chest forwards so that it firmly presses against the chin.

Straighten your legs so that they are vertical. This is the final pose.

The body should be supported as much as possible by the shoulders, nape of the neck and back of the head.

The purpose of the arms is mainly to provide stability and to check the body if there is any tendency to overbalance.

Close the eyes.

Try to relax the whole body.

Breathe deeply and slowly.

Be aware of the breathing.

Stage 3: returning to the starting position

Stay in the final position for a comfortable length of time.

Then fold the straight legs over the head so that the feet are above and behind the back of the head.

Slowly release the position of the hands behind the chest and place the arms flat on the floor. Slowly lower the buttocks to the floor.

Then gradually rotate the straight legs over

the top of the head and lower them to the ground; again try not to use the assistance of the arms unless it is necessary. Completely relax the body when it is once again flat on the ground.

Then practise the counterpose.

Mistakes to avoid

One should take care to avoid the following errors:

- Don't do the asana too quickly like a physical jerk. The movement of the body during raising and lowering should be slow, graceful, controlled and without sudden spasms. Many people forcefully propel themselves into the final position and nearly break their necks in the process. Slowly elevate the legs and raise the body, being aware of the operation of each relevant muscle and the progressive movement of the body. The same applies to the lowering of the body. The legs should touch the floor in the same way that a falling leaf would touch the ground.
- Don't raise the head off the floor throughout the entire practice.
- Don't tense the legs in the final pose; let them relax and don't point the feet. This is important, for tension of the legs implies contraction of muscles, which prevents free drainage of blood from the legs.
- Don't hold the legs perfectly vertical in the final pose if this requires muscular effort. Ideally the legs should be vertical but this does not suit the constitution of every person. If you find it easier to hold the pose comfortably by inclining the legs over the top of the head, then by all means do so. In fact, if you find that you can more easily press the chest against the chin by suspending the legs over the head, we recommend that you adopt this pose. However, there has to be a compromise; don't incline your legs too far over your head for you will be doing another asana and not sarvangasana. Your legs should be reasonably vertical, but so that you feel comfortable in the final pose.
- The chest (sternum or jugular notch) should be pressed against the chin, but without straining the neck. This is an important aspect of the asana. Without doing this, the asana loses many of its

benefits for the blood flow is not directed specifically towards the thyroid gland. However, if your neck is stiff, then you may find a little difficulty in doing this. Don't strain or force, but slowly loosen the neck joints and stretch the associated muscles over a period of weeks. Often, however, people are unable to press the chest against the chin because they don't raise the trunk as vertically as it should be. In this case, the arms should be used to further elevate the trunk, and the hands should be placed lower down at the back of the chest near the shoulders.

- The chin should not be pressed towards the chest. The chest should be pressed towards the chin. This is important.
- Keep the legs straight and together throughout the entire practice. There is no need to separate or bend them.

Alternative method for beginners

Some people may find difficulty raising their legs from the starting position while keeping them straight. Under these circumstances, there is absolutely no reason why you should not bend your legs in the starting position to make it easier to elevate them.

The method is as follows:

Lie flat on the ground facing upwards.

Bend your legs and place the soles of the feet flat on the ground with the knees pointing upwards.

Then raise your trunk to the vertical position by contracting the abdominal muscles and pushing the lower back with the hands and arms.

Keep the legs bent.

Adjust the position of the trunk so that the chest presses firmly against the chin.

Place the hands on the side and rear of the ribs with the elbows on the ground.

When you feel sufficient stability then slowly straighten the legs to attain the final pose.

Breathing

Retain the breath either inside or outside while raising and lowering the body. Breathe slowly and deeply in the final pose.

Awareness

Be aware of the smooth execution of the raising and lowering of the body while adopting the

final pose and then resuming the starting position.

In the final pose be aware of the slow and deep breathing. If you wish you can feel the breath moving in and out of the throat region and charging the thyroid with vitality.

Duration

There are conflicting opinions expressed regarding the most suitable duration of sarvangasana. But actually there should be no contradiction, for the duration depends on many factors. Beginners should practise sarvangasana for no more than a minute for at least two or three weeks of daily practice. Then this duration can be increased by thirty seconds every week. If you like you can increase by a few seconds every day - this is your choice.

For general health benefits, and for a person with reasonable purity of body, we recommend no more than three to five minutes in the final pose. If you want to increase the duration then we suggest you seek the guidance of a suitable yoga teacher who can assess your physical suitability. Often a person is recommended to practise prolonged periods of sarvangasana to remove specific illnesses. Under these circumstances, again you should seek expert guidance. If you practise sarvangasana for too long and your body is not prepared or is full of impurities, then the asana may cause harmful results. Sarvangasana and other inverted asanas can give wonderful benefits if, and only if, they are done correctly and for a suitable duration for the particular individual. It is when people practise them for excessive lengths of time that they cause themselves harm.

The best rule is to follow the dictates of your body. If you feel tired or any form of discomfort, then this is a sure indication that you have stayed in the final pose for too long. In this case immediately terminate the asana. But this is the upper limit; long before this point of tiredness you should have finished the asana.

You may wish to practise sarvangasana for a prolonged duration in order to increase brain power, or as a meditational technique, or as a preliminary to other meditational techniques. There is no harm in this" providing your body is healthy, the blood reasonably purified and providing you have been regular-

ly practising other asanas for a year or so. There is no reason why you should not practise for fifteen or thirty minutes. But again we advise you to seek expert guidance.

Counterpose

It is essential that you practise a counterpose after any inverted asana. In the case of sarvangasana, the counterpose can be any asana which bends the head backwards in the opposite manner to that which it takes during sarvangasana. The best asanas are bhujangasana³, ushtrasana⁴ as well as various other asanas such as chakrasana⁵, supta vajrasana and matsyasana⁶. These should be performed for at least a minute or so in order to remove the tension in the neck.

Sequence

Sarvangasana can be done either at the beginning of your asana program (after surya namaskara and shavasana) or at the end of the program. The choice depends on various factors.

If you practise only asanas, then it is best to practise sarvangasana in the beginning, for it is an excellent asana for intensifying the power of awareness and wakefulness throughout the ensuing asanas. This will allow you to gain the most out of the asana program. Many people practise asanas in an automatic, sleepy manner and due to this they fail to reap the full benefits.

If you practise pranayama and meditation techniques after your asana program, then you should do sarvangasana at the end. In this case, the other asanas slowly loosen up the body and relax the mind, while sarvangasana intensifies awareness and wakefulness for the following pranayama and meditational practices. This is most important, for without awareness, pranayama and meditation also fail to give their fullest benefits. If you have time, you can perform sarvangasana both before and after the asana program.

Many people do halasana⁷ (plough pose) immediately after sarvangasana. This is perfectly valid, for it is natural and easy to drop directly into the final pose of halasana from the final pose of sarvangasana. If you already know and practise halasana, we suggest you adopt the following sequence:

1. Sarvangasana starting position
2. Sarvangasana final pose

3. Halasana final pose
 4. Halasana variations (if you know them)
 5. Sarvangasana starting position
 6. Counterpose for sarvangasana
- This is an excellent combination.

People who should not practise sarvangasana

The following people should not perform sarvangasana without seeking expert medical guidance:

- Those who have weak hearts or excessively high blood pressure. Though after a short time the blood pressure is greatly reduced in sarvangasana, initially it is increased. It is the initial increase of pressure that can cause harm.
- People with an excessively enlarged thyroid. Though sarvangasana is a wonderful asana for alleviating and removing an enlarged thyroid, it can cause harmful effects if the thyroid is too swollen and if it is toxic. A person who has an excessively large thyroid should first practise other asanas and yoga techniques under guidance to reduce the swelling. When the thyroid has reduced in size, sarvangasana can be done with great benefit.
- People who have weak blood vessels in the eyes.
- Sufferers of arteriosclerosis.
- Sufferers of cerebral thrombosis.
- People with excessively impure blood. This is something that you must judge for yourself. If you are not sure then seek guidance. A person with experience will be able to tell immediately if your blood is pure or impure. If you are severely constipated or your skin is covered in boils, then this is an indication that your blood is excessively toxic.
- People with slipped discs. It is advisable not to practise sarvangasana if you have this ailment for you may aggravate the dislocation of the spine when raising and lowering the body to and from the final pose of sarvangasana.

General limitations

One should not practise sarvangasana under the following conditions:

- If you feel physically tired.
- During periods of illness and fever, such as during coughs and colds, influenza, etc.

- Until at least three hours have elapsed after food.
- During menstruation and advanced stages of pregnancy.

Sarvangasana should be immediately terminated if you experience the following:

- Excessive perspiration.
- Dizziness.
- Palpitations of the heart.
- General discomfort.

Sarvangasana can be done by people of all ages, young or old, male or female. Elderly people, however, should proceed carefully if they are learning the asana. Many people say that children should not practise sarvangasana for fear of upsetting their normal growth pattern determined by the thyroid. We don't agree with this belief, for sarvangasana does not alter the functions or duties normally carried out by the thyroid gland. The asana merely improves its operational efficiency so that it can carry out its functions more effectively and smoothly. The normal operation of the thyroid is in no way altered. You must also remember that children are continually twisting their bodies into strange positions and probably turn their body upside down a number of times daily. Thus most active children are unknowingly stimulating the blood flow to the thyroid in the course of their play while suffering no ill effects. It is understimulation and lack of exercise, especially in adults, that causes more harm. Moreover, if a child is sluggish and disinclined to play, we recommend that he or she practise sarvangasana to ensure that the thyroid functions correctly to give normal growth patterns.

Benefits

The benefits of sarvangasana are vast. The following is merely a brief resume.

The direct influence on the thyroid gland helps to remove many diseases and generally maintain good health of the entire body. The ageing process is very much associated with the endocrinal system. One can help to maintain youthfulness and rejuvenate an ageing body by regular practice of sarvangasana.

The thyroid gland controls the metabolism of the body. Therefore, by improving the efficiency of the thyroid gland through sarvangasana one can maintain the correct

body weight. Of course, this assumes that one does not consume excessive amounts of food. Many people are overweight because of hormonal imbalance, not specifically because of overeating. Sarvangasana helps to normalize the body weight by balancing the endocrinal system.

The endocrinal system is in a continual state of fluctuation because of adaptation to both the inner and outer environment. If the endocrinal system is malfunctioning, then the body is unable to adjust to these continual changes and illness can result. Sarvangasana acts on the thyroid gland, the pituitary and the brain. All these are mutually interdependent organs. By simultaneously balancing them Sarvangasana helps to balance the entire endocrinal system as well as all the systems that are dependent on the hormonal system, such as the circulatory, respiratory, digestive and reproductive systems. The body is a total unit and though it is composed of different systems, they are all mutually dependent on each other. They do not act separately. They are only discussed as distinct systems in books for easy understanding. If one system is out of balance then the other systems will also become unbalanced. Sarvangasana integrates all the body systems, improving health and removing disease.

Sarvangasana improves the blood supply to the brain. This is the master controller of the entire body - organs, muscles, nerves, etc. If the brain cells are not healthy, how can the rest of the body be healthy? A motor car, for example, cannot run without the engine. If the engine does not receive sufficient oil or petrol then its body, the car shell and moving parts cannot possibly work. It is the same with the human brain. If the brain is malfunctioning then the rest of the body must also function incorrectly. Sarvangasana helps to rectify this situation and in this way, many seemingly obscure ailments can be eliminated.

The influence of sarvangasana on the parathyroid glands helps to ensure normal bone growth and regeneration and can prevent premature ossification (hardening) of the bones.

Many asanas bend the spine forwards, but few of them specifically bend the cervical (neck) region of the spine in a forward direction. Sarvangasana does this very effectively and improves the flexibility of the vertebrae and

tone of the nerves that pass through the neck to and from the brain. Furthermore, the nerves in this region receive a fresh supply of oxygenated blood, which helps to keep them in good condition. These nerves penetrate the entire body and so their good health again leads to improved health of the whole body. The bending of the spine at the neck also helps to remove backache and headache.

The pressure of the chin against the chest in the final pose forces the practitioner to breathe abdominally. It is physically impossible to breathe from the chest in this position. Most people breathe very superficially and suffer bad health as a consequence. They don't breathe from the abdomen, and it is this type of breathing that is most important in the breathing process. This abdominal breathing during sarvangasana encourages the individual to breathe abdominally throughout the day. This is merely a matter of training, nothing more. But this simple training can radically improve health. Firstly, it improves the intake of air and secondly, it ensures that the abdominal organs are given the continual massage that they require. The improved respiration is of great help in treating bronchitis.

Sarvangasana is very useful for asthmatics. These people tend to breathe superficially by moving their shoulders and their chests - they tend to avoid abdominal breathing. Sarvangasana helps to rectify this situation and habit. Some asthmatics have also said that sarvangasana should be done immediately before an attack as a preventative measure.

Sarvangasana reduces blood pressure by acting on the carotid sinuses in the neck⁸. Therefore, sarvangasana is a useful practice for those people who have slightly high blood pressure. However, those people who have excessively high blood pressure should not do the asana for initially the blood pressure is increased.

Sarvangasana is very useful for treating piles (haemorrhoids) and varicose veins, for it helps to drain accumulated blood from these areas. People who suffer from these ailments should practise in the morning and evening for at least five minutes, more if possible. Those who have piles should rhythmically contract and relax their anal muscles, for this helps to remove the blood from the area⁹.

This asana is also very useful for toning the legs and removing fatigue.

Regular practice helps to remove various types of digestive ailments, especially where they are caused by blood congestion or general inefficiency of the organs. Diabetics are advised to practise sarvangasana for it not only influences the pancreas, but also the entire endocrinal system. If you suffer from viscerop-tosis (displacement of the abdominal organs) then you should practise sarvangasana to help rectify this situation.

Sarvangasana tones the reproductive organs and helps to prevent degeneration of the testes, gonads and ovaries as well as the other sexual organs, male and female. It has been found useful in helping to relieve menstrual, menopausal and other general sexual disorders. It helps to alleviate hydrocele, leucorrhea, spermatorrhea, etc.

During sarvangasana the whole region of the neck, throat and face is flooded with fresh oxygenated blood which helps to improve the nourishment of this entire area and the many organs in the vicinity. The tonsils (important

lymph nodes for ensuring protection against infection), the ears, the eyes, the lungs, the thymus and so forth all benefit from the improved blood supply. The thymus is believed to play an important part in the normal growth of children. It also has an immunological role and so sarvangasana increases the resistance of the body to disease by influencing both the tonsils and the thymus. The salivary glands in the mouth also work more efficiently, which in turn aids digestion. Wrinkles and spots on the face are also reduced by the improved blood supply. Facial complexion is generally improved. In general, we can say that sarvangasana helps to eliminate and prevent various types of throat and nose ailments, including the common cold.

Finally sarvangasana is an excellent method of tranquillizing the mind and helps to bring harmony and peace into one's life. This is also useful for obtaining the most out of other yogic practices. If you perform sarvangasana before meditational techniques it will greatly help you to benefit fully from your practices.

Variations of sarvangasana

The following two asanas are well-known variations of the basic form of sarvangasana.

They should only be attempted after mastering sarvangasana.

PADMA SARVANGASANA (SHOULDER STAND LOTUS POSE)

In English this asana is known as the 'raised lotus shoulder stand pose'. It can be done in two ways as follows:

1. Perform sarvangasana. Then in the final pose fold the legs into padmasana.
2. Do padmasana. Then lean backwards and lie flat on your back. Elevate the legs to the vertical pose. In both methods the final pose is the same.



The benefits are the same as for sarvangasana, except that free drainage of blood from the legs is impeded. Therefore, people who want to treat piles or varicose veins should do the basic sarvangasana and not this variation. This asana gives an excellent stretch in the pelvic region and compresses the internal organs. It is useful for toning up the sexual organs, especially in women.

NIRALAMBA SARVANGASANA (UNSUPPORTED SHOULDER STAND POSE)

In English this asana is known as the 'unsupported shoulder stand pose'. It is similar to sarvangasana, and differs in only one way: the arms and hands are not held behind the back. The arms can be held in any one of the following positions:

1. Straight and vertical so that they lie in line with the raised legs and the trunk. In this variation there must be perfect balance of the entire body. If necessary you can practise near a wall to prevent falling and possible injury. The body is supported only on the shoulders, nape of the neck and back of the head. You should not try this

asana until you can do the basic form of sarvangasana without applying pressure from the elbows.

2. The arms are extended directly behind the head so that they are parallel to each other and flat on the floor.
3. The arms are placed flat on the floor, parallel with each other and pointed in the opposite direction to the head.

All these three forms of niralamba sarvangasana should be done slowly from the final pose of the basic form of sarvangasana.

Notes

¹ Sirshasana: Part 1 - Book II, Lesson 21, Topic 4;
Part 2 - Book II, Lesson 22, Topic 3

² Breathing - Book I, Lesson 1, Topic 4

³ Book I, Lesson 4, Topic 2

⁴ Book I, Lesson 6, Topic 3

⁵ Book III, Lesson 26, Topic 4

⁶ Book II, Lesson 20, Topic 4

⁷ Book II, Lesson 24, Topic 3

⁸ Book II, Lesson 14, Topic 3

⁹ Ashwini mudra - Topic 3 of this lesson

Mudras: Ashwini Mudra

An integral part of kriya yoga techniques is the practice of moola bandha'. To do this bandha correctly one must have sensitivity in the region of the anus and the perineum (the area between the anus and the sexual organs). An excellent technique for developing this sensitivity is called *ashwini mudra*. Without first of all mastering ashwini mudra it is very difficult for most people to practise moola bandha correctly. It is for this reason that we have introduced ashwini mudra at this stage.

Ashwini mudra also gives many benefits in its own right as we will shortly explain.

.ASHWINI MUDRA (HORSE GESTURE)

The word *ashwini* means 'horse' and in this context the word *mudra* means 'attitude'. Therefore, this practice can be literally translated as 'the attitude of the horse'. It does not take much imagination to understand the reason for the name; if anyone has ever watched the anus of a horse, he will see that the horse very often does the yogic practice of ashwini mudra. That is, the horse rhythmically contracts and relaxes the anal muscles.

Posture

Ashwini mudra can be done in almost any asana, including any of the meditational asanas previously described². You can integrate it with any asana that you do in your asana program. However, since we have introduced sarvangasana³ in this lesson, we suggest that you definitely perform it in the final pose of sarvangasana. Not only does this mean that you can do two practices at the same time, but this combination happens to be very beneficial, as we will explain later.

Technique

There are two methods. For the sake of explanation we will assume that ashwini mudra is performed in a meditational asana.

Method 1: rapid contraction

Sit in a comfortable sitting pose.
Relax the whole body.
Close the eyes.
Breathe normally.
Rapidly contract and relax the anus.
Try to confine the contraction to the area of the anus though you will find that other pelvic muscles will come into action.
Let the muscular contraction and relaxation be rhythmical.
Don't strain.
Repeat the practice for as long as you have time available.
In this method there is no synchronization between breath and contraction.

Method 2: slow contraction and retention

Sit in a comfortable pose.
Contract the anus as you inhale.
At the end of inhalation hold the breath and also the contraction.
Let the contraction be as tight as possible but without strain.
Release the muscular contraction as you breathe out.
This is 1 round.
Repeat as many rounds as possible.
This method requires synchronization between the breath and the movement of the anus.

Note

It is impossible to confine the muscular contraction only to the small area of the anus. Other pelvic muscles and muscles associated with the sexual organs will also contract. But try as much as possible to concentrate on the contraction at the anus. At first this is difficult, but with practice it becomes easier and easier.

Awareness

In method 1 the awareness should be on the muscular contraction and relaxation at the anus.

In method 2 one should be aware of the coordination between the breathing and the muscular contraction and relaxation.

Duration

There is no limit on the duration of practice. It is only limited by the time that you have available. However, beginners should not overstrain their muscles. Increase the duration of the practice as the anal muscles become stronger and you gain more control over them.

Which method to practise?

You can practise whichever method you like best, or whichever is most appropriate for the pose in which you practise. However, method 1 is easier and therefore more suitable for beginners. If you find it reasonably easy to locate the area, you should start to practise method 2.

Benefits

Many people have weak anal muscles (sphincters). This is closely associated with such widespread ailments as constipation and piles (haemorrhoids). Ashwini mudra helps to stimulate intestinal peristalsis (the wavelike motion that propels the stool through the intestines to the anus for evacuation) and therefore is a great help in alleviating constipation and thus improving the general health and well-being of the practitioner.

Piles are characterized by an accumulation of blood in the region of the anus. The practice of ashwini mudra helps to squeeze this stagnant blood away from the anus. This process is intensified if the mudra is combined with sarvangasana³. Ashwini mudra physically draws the blood away from the anus and sarvangasana allows the blood to drain downwards back to the heart. Every sufferer of piles should definitely practise this combination daily.

Those people who suffer from prolapse of the anus or rectum should also do ashwini mudra. By strengthening the associated muscles, these ailments will slowly disappear.

As we have already pointed out, everyone who is seriously intending to practise kriya yoga in the future should definitely perform and master ashwini mudra. In this manner you will develop sensitivity in the anal area and be able to isolate the muscles from other

muscular systems in the pelvic region. This is important for eventual mastery of moola bandha.

Combinations with other practices

As we have already recommended, ashwini mudra can and should be integrated with sarvangasana. Either method 1 or 2 can be used.

Ashwini mudra method 2 can also be integrated with nadi shodhana pranayama, so that you hold the anal contraction during retention of breath⁴. The reader can adopt any other combination that his imagination will permit.

Notes

¹ Book II, Lesson 19, Topic 4

² Book I, Lesson 7, Topic 2

³ Topic 2 of this lesson

⁴ Topic 4 of this lesson

Pranayama: Practice

Pranayama is an essential part of kriya yoga. That is, to do many of the practices of kriya yoga it is necessary to exhale and inhale with control and to retain the breath for prolonged periods of time. It is for this reason that we are spending so much time developing the practice of nadi shodhana pranayama.

NADI SHODHANA - STAGE 4 WITH JALANDHARA BANDHA

Current practice

In the previous two lessons we suggested that you practise a ratio of 1:8:6:2:1:8:6:2 for inhalation: inner retention: exhalation: outer retention: inhalation: inner retention: exhalation and outer retention respectively¹. We also suggested that you perform Jalandhara bandha with each inner retention. If you have mastered this practice then you should proceed to the next practice.

New practice

Retain the same ratio but now try to perform jalandhara bandha with both outer and inner retention. This is not an easy practice and we emphasize that you should not strain. In fact we prefer that you reduce the ratio rather than hold your breath beyond its capacity.

Combination with ashwini mudra

This is an extra practice that you can combine with nadi shodhana pranayama. It is not essential. If you want to integrate the practice, we suggest you do so in the following manner:

1. Until you develop control over the muscles of the anus, practise stage 1 of ashwini mudra². This should be practised during the periods of jalandhara bandha in conjunction with breath retention. During the breath retention you have to mentally count the duration so that you can maintain the fixed ratio. We suggest that you synchronize the mental counting with the

rhythmical contraction and relaxation of the anus. This will improve the intensity of your awareness and greatly improve the pranayama practice.

2. When you have developed sufficient control over the anal muscles then you can retain the muscular action for the entire duration of each breath retention. If you wish you can integrate your mental counting with the blood pulse that you will detect at the region of the contracted anus.

This is a very useful combination of practices, but please don't strain.

Notes

¹ Book II, Lesson 14, Topic 4; Book II, Lesson 15, Topic 5

² Topic 3 of this lesson

Shivalingam

The shivalingam can be used as an object of concentration. It can be used as a focus of your awareness, to draw you into the deeper realms of your being. It can be used as a vehicle to higher experience.

The shivalingam is a widely venerated symbol in India. It is a tantric symbol, as well as being an integral part of Hinduism. But the veneration of the lingam is not confined to India. It has been revered throughout every part of the world, especially in bygone ages. It is a symbol which is buried in the deeper layers of your psyche. Even though you may not know this, it is nevertheless there, waiting to rise to the surface, to conscious perception, together with all the knowledge that surrounds it. If you bring the symbol up from the depths, then you will simultaneously realize the incredible reality that it represents.

If you have time, concentrate on the lingam, reflect on its meaning. And if your concentration and reflection is sufficiently intense and one-pointed, then you will bring a veritable jewel of knowledge to your awareness, a prize to the surface of the mind. Or we can put it another way: if you submerge yourself into the mind by intense concentration on the lingam, then you will start to plummet, to explore the depths of the mind. Whichever way you look at the process, the result is the same.

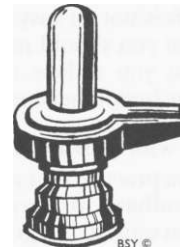
The word lingam means 'symbol' or 'sign'. In the tantric sect of shaivism (followers of Shiva) the lingam is the most important symbol. It represents consciousness or Shiva. There is a beautiful song about the shivalingam in India, called 'Lingasthakam'.

Concentration on the lingam

The picture that we have included can be used as an object of concentration, using the meditative practice of *trataka*¹. If you can visualize the lingam in front of your closed eyes (in the *chidakasha*) then this is an even better practice.

There is an excellent practice in shaivism which uses a small, well-polished lingam and a candle. The candle is placed behind and above your left shoulder so that it shines on the shivalingam held in front of the face. This produces a tiny dot of light on the surface of the lingam, which can then be used as a fixed point of concentration. This is a method of *trataka*, but it is more refined for it is combined with ritual worship, and mantras and other refinements that heighten the effectiveness of the practice. We have not given full details, for a specially made lingam is necessary, and they are not readily available. We have only mentioned the practice from the point of view of interest. It is an excellent technique that is practised among the shaivites (tantrics) of India.

The lingam implies much more than seems obvious and far more than can be conveyed by words. It was realized by sages in deep states of meditation. You can use it as a method for reaching the same state and experience.



Notes

¹ Book I, Lesson 8, Topic 6

Meditation: Practices for Visualization

Everyone has the ability to mentally create and visualize any chosen object. However, most people lose this ability through lack of practice and a tendency to overload the mind with verbal concepts. The capacity to visualize internally remains, but it is dormant. It is only the artist or so-called primitive people who retain this ability to think in terms of pictures as opposed to words. Many anthropologists who have studied aboriginal and seemingly uncivilized people in different parts of the world, have noticed a fundamental difference in the way they relate to their surroundings and to life in general. They have noticed that these people tend to think or conceptualize in terms of mental pictures. They have much less tendency to think in terms of words, ideas and theories than does modern, scientific man. The whole mental process of perception appears to be different. But actually the only difference is that these primitive people function and perceive from a more fundamental level of the mind. That is, whereas modern man functions and lives on the surface of the mind, these other people function from deeper layers. They are more in contact with their own psychic levels.

There is nothing wrong with thinking and working in terms of ideas and concepts. This is an integral part of modern day life. Without this, science and the modern world could never have evolved and you would be unable to read these words. But at the same time, continuous functioning at this level tends to limit the awakening of the powers of the mind. The deeper levels of the mind do not function in terms of words. They function in terms of psychic pictures. Therefore, to expand one's awareness of the inner workings of the mind, to explore the deeper realms, it is necessary to open up this ability to perceive mental impressions in terms of psychic visions. It is necessary to develop receptivity to pictorial mental impressions. One must remain open to the

possibility of inner mental experiences in terms of visions.

All yoga practices help to increase this receptivity to psychic manifestations of the mind. A particularly good method of unfolding this faculty is by consciously creating mental pictures. This is the purpose of the following practice - object visualization at will. It supplements a similar practice called recall by revisualization¹.

At first you may find this practice difficult. Please do not worry. Most people will have this problem, especially those who are intellectually inclined. You have been habituated to thinking only in terms of words, but with practice and time you will find this technique easier and easier to perform. Furthermore, as you relax more and harmonize your life through yoga practice, you will also find that the practice becomes progressively easier.

OBJECT VISUALIZATION AT WILL

Purpose

We have already briefly discussed the purpose of the technique. It is a method of developing the faculty of visualization as a method of opening up the realms of the mind which are currently inaccessible to your awareness. Also many meditational techniques, including kriya yoga, require visualization of an inner object. This acts as a focal point for awareness and confines one's awareness to a limited field, removing it from the tangle of outer and inner turmoil. This one-pointedness, even for a short time, results in many benefits. It brings relaxation and acts as a focal point for looking into the mind. It is the prelude to the experience of meditation.

Many people are told that they must be aware of only one object during certain meditative techniques such as *trataka*², but they do not know which object to choose. They change from one to another, but once you

find the object that is ideally suited to your temperament there will be no doubt. You will cease to even consider other objects, but first of all you must find your symbol. This takes time, practice and aspiration. Visualization practices, such as the one we will shortly describe, help you to find the most suitable symbol. This can happen in two ways:

1. Either during the willed visualization of various objects, one object will suddenly and almost inexplicably manifest deep meaning to you. It will stimulate feelings that you did not before appreciate. This could be the most suitable object for meditational purposes.

2. Or during the practice or any other practice, you will suddenly be confronted with a symbol. It will spring up from the depths of the mind to conscious perception. Your sensitivity to inner perception has allowed it to surface. This too can be the object of awareness during meditative practices. So this practice is very useful for increasing your receptivity and perception of inner psychic symbols.

This visualization also has a more basic purpose: it calms the mind. If you have been buffeted by the storms of life, what better way is there of relaxing the mind and finding a little peace, than by creating beautiful inner objects or scenes? If you see an inner picture of a white swan, or a peacock, it is very difficult for the mind to remain angry or worried. So if you feel tense or emotionally upset, we suggest you try this practice. No special preparations are necessary. You can practise in almost any place and at any time.

Where to visualize?

The best place is *chidakasha*. That is, the space that you see in front of your closed eyes³.

Some people say that you should visualize the objects in the *hridayakasha*, the space in the region of the heart. Others suggest that one should visualize in the *daharakasha*, the space in the region of the pelvis at the mooladhara chakra. These spaces can be utilized for this practice and any other meditational practice, but most people will find difficulty in perceiving these spaces. For this reason we recommend visualization in *chidakasha*.

Technique

The explanation of this technique is very simple, but the actual practice is a little more

difficult, especially for beginners. The technique is as follows:

Take a comfortable sitting position.

Close the eyes.

Look at the blank space that you see in front of your closed eyes.

Think of any object.

Try to visualize this object in *chidakasha*.

You may find this difficult; don't worry.

Watch the image for a short time, say up to 30 seconds.

The image can be stationary or moving.

Then wipe out the image and think of another object. Create a new image.

Continue in this manner for as long as you can spare time for the practice.

Choice of objects

There is no limit to the objects you can choose. The scope is inexhaustible. It is only limited by your imagination. To help you, we will give the following suggested list. They are only our suggestions and it is not necessary to restrict yourself to them. Create any objects that you wish from your own mind.

Living things: a swooping bird, a graceful cat, a thoughtful elephant, an alert deer, an agile monkey, a peaceful contented cow, a sly fox, a fluttering butterfly, a proud peacock, a gliding fish, a basking crocodile, a beautiful lotus, a blood red rose, a large yellow sunflower, a blade of grass swaying in the breeze, a shady oak tree, a leaf dampened with dew and many other objects.

Deities and famous people: your guru, any great saint, Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, Rama, Krishna, Durga, Kali, Ganesha, Shiva and other deities.

Objects of nature: the sun, the moon, any of the signs of the zodiac, any precious stone such as diamond, onyx, sapphire, topaz, ruby, cat's eye, pearl and so forth, a towering mountain, a floating cloud, an oasis, rolling hills, green valleys, a sandy beach, rugged cliffs, a quiet forest and so on.

Buildings: a temple, a church, a mosque, the pyramids of Egypt, an ashram or monastery, a pagoda in a beautiful sculptured garden, a stupa, old ruins, a shrine or any holy place, a hermitage in the forest, etc.

Traditional symbols: a yin yang sign, a cross, a shivalingam, shaligram, the eternal flame, menorah, the chalice, a prayer wheel, an Aum

symbol, a trident and any other symbol that you can think of.

Time of practice

You can practise object visualization at any time. If you feel tired, angry or tense during the day there is absolutely no reason why you should not practise this technique as a way of harmonizing the mind. Even five minutes will help to calm the mind.

The best time to practise in order to attain clear visualization is after pranayama. Pranayama heightens sensitivity and makes inner visualization much easier.

Once again we remind you that you may find this technique a little difficult at first. Don't become frustrated for this will only lead to mental tension. Merely persevere and the technique will become easier. But time and regular practice are necessary.

Notes

¹ Book I, Lesson 6, Topic 6

² Book I, Lesson 8, Topic 6

³ Book II, Lesson 13, Topic 5

Daily Practice Program

In this lesson we have discussed bhakti yoga, ashwini mudra, sarvangasana, object visualization at will and nadi shodhana pranayama combined with jalandhara bandha with both

inner and outer breath retention. We suggest that you integrate these practices into your yoga practice program in the following manner.

Practice	Rounds	Minutes
Program 1: duration 2 hours		
Surya Namaskara	—	10
Shavasana	—	4
Shalabhasana	—	4
Shashankasana	—	4
Paschimottanasana	—	4
Ardha Matsyendrasana	—	4
Yoga Mudrasana	—	4
Sarvangasana with Ashwini Mudra	—	4
Bhujangasana	—	4
Shavasana	—	3
Nadi Shodhana Pranayama and Jalandhara Bandha with Antar and Bahir Kumbhaka	—	20
Aum chanting	—	10
Japa	—	30
Chidakasha Dharana with object visualization	—	15
		120
Program 2: duration 1 1/2 hours		
Surya Namaskara	—	10
Shavasana	—	3
Shalabhasana	—	4
Shashankasana	—	4
Paschimottanasana	—	4
Ardha Matsyendrasana	—	4
Yoga Mudrasana	—	4

Sarvangasana with Ashwini Mudra	—	4
Bhujangasana	—	4
Nadi Shodhana Pranayama and Jalandhara Bandha with Antar and Bahir Kumbhaka	—	15
Aum chanting	—	4
Japa	—	25
Chidakasha Dharana with object visualization	—	5
		<hr/> 90

Program 3: duration 1 hour

Surya Namaskara	—	7
Shavasana	—	3
Shashankasana	—	4
Paschimottanasana	—	3
Ardha Matsyendrasana	—	3
Yoga Mudrasana	—	3
Sarvangasana with Ashwini Mudra	—	4
Bhujangasana	—	3
Nadi Shodhana Pranayama and Jalandhara Bandha with Antar and Bahir Kumbhaka	—	10
Japa	—	15
Chidakasha Dharana with object visualization	—	5
		<hr/> 60

Program 4: duration 1/2 hour for general health

Surya Namaskara	—	5
Shavasana	—	3
Paschimottanasana	—	3
Ardha Matsyendrasana	—	3
Sarvangasana	—	3
Bhujangasana	—	3
Nadi Shodhana Pranayama and Jalandhara Bandha with Antar and Bahir Kumbhaka	—	10
		<hr/> 30

Try to find more time in order to do the very important meditational techniques.

