

# Yoga Education (2<sup>nd</sup> Semester)

## The Basics of Yoga Therapy

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During the last thirty years, many doctors and scientists have tried to experiment on yoga and its effects on the body. In fact, first of all they thought that yoga asanas were some sort of gymnastic exercises for the body and muscles. Therefore, the earlier teaching methods of yoga were very dynamic. They had speed and momentum. In the meantime, Swami Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh, swamis who are now yoga around the globe, became a noted writer on yogasana and pranayama in the teaching 1940's. The first book he printed was '**Pranayama and Long Life; Yogasanas and Good Health.**' In that book Swami Sivananda indicated which asanas are good for which particular diseases. He introduced the idea that yoga is not merely gymnastic exercises, but it has a far reaching influence on all the internal processes of the human body.

At first it was very difficult for the scientific minded people to accept this. How can **asanas** (postures), **pranayama** (breathing), and **hatha yoga shatkarmas** (practices of purification) check 'incurable' diseases like asthma, diabetes, blood pressure; skin diseases like allergic dermatitis, psoriasis; peptic ulcers, duodenal ulcers, gastric ulcers; arthritis, rheumatism? In the beginning it was very hard to believe. People did believe that exercises promote good health, but there was no scientific evidence as to how the asanas worked on the human body.

### **Imbalance in the endocrinal system**

When Swami Sivananda wrote his book, he gave quite a few hints. The first was that with regular practice of asana, endocrinal imbalances are removed. There are many glands in the human body. Some are called endocrine glands, because they inject hormonal fluid directly into the blood vessels, and others are called exocrine glands, about which we are not concerned now. This endocrine system is very important because it can completely

change the structure of the body, the nature of a person, his temperament, and many other things.

Take the thyroid gland, for example, which is situated in the lower part of the throat. It is responsible for controlling the temperature in the body. Usually around the age of twelve it starts functioning, and at the age of seventy or eighty it stops. Of course, it can stop earlier also, say at about fifty eight or sixty. During all these years this gland produces, at the most, a total amount of about  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of hormonal secretions, which is injected into the blood vessels regularly in minute quantities. And with that tiny amount of hormone you maintain your rate of metabolism, inner body temperature, and emotional balance.

In the same way there are other glands in the body, like the pancreas for the production of insulin, adrenal glands for adrenalin, gonads for sperm and ova. Imbalance in the endocrinal system is a major factor responsible for disease. That is what Swami Sivananda wrote in his book for the first time. Later it was found that he was absolutely correct.

### **Nervous system**

There is another important factor involved in bringing about disease and that is imbalance in the nervous system- the sympathetic, parasympathetic and autonomic nervous systems. In daily life we are more concerned with the sympathetic and parasympathetic. These nervous systems control the impulses, influxes, transmission of efferent and afferent orders. If there is any major imbalance in these two lines, then you have a real problem. These nervous systems are also responsible for controlling and regulating the endocrine system.

Let us talk about the pancreas. This large gland secretes many fluids, the most important of which is insulin, responsible for balancing the sugar assimilation. If there is any imbalance in the secretion of insulin, then the sugar assimilation is not properly regulated, and most of it is expelled. That results in what is called diabetes.

Now, it is the parasympathetic nervous system which is responsible for creating a block in the pancreas. If you overeat and don't do any physical exercise - number one, or when you are under constant stress and strain - number two, then the parasympathetic nervous system becomes underactive. Then its normal functioning is obstructed. As a result, it is unable to send impulses to the pancreas and the pancreas does not produce insulin.

## **Prana and mind**

In yoga, what exactly do we do to rectify this situation? Let us proceed very systematically. Yoga means union or connection. Hatha yoga is a science in which two systems in the body are united, are connected. These two systems are known as sun and moon, mind and prana, vital and mental energy. These are the two energy systems which are responsible for our physical existence. These energies are functioning in each and every part of our body. Hence, we have life force, which is dynamic, and consciousness, which is static. Whenever there is any imbalance in these two energy levels, then sickness or disease results.

**Prana** means vital energy. It is responsible for all the physiological functions of the body, for mobility, body temperature, digestion, excretion, circulation, respiration, etc. For all the activities that are taking place in the body, prana, the life force, is responsible. That is one force in you. If that force leaves your body, you will die. Without prana, there is no metabolism, no anabolism, no catabolism. When there is no prana in your body, that is called death.

The other force in the body is mind or consciousness, through which you think and feel. That force is responsible for knowledge or awareness, and if you do not have that, then you may be alive, but you will not know it. In front of you there may be beautiful flowers with a sweet fragrance, or something rotten and stinking, but you will not know the difference. You are just alive. There is no consciousness, no perception. So, in the science of hatha yoga, a balance between the life principle and the mental principle is effected. When the mental principle is unbalanced, then you have mental diseases born out of the mind. And when the pranic principle is unbalanced, then you have diseases belonging to the body. The diseases of the mind are known as psychic diseases and those of the body as somatic diseases.

A disease may originate from the mind and go into the body, or it may originate in the body and affect the mind. A disease which originates in the mind and affects the body is called **psychosomatic**. A disease which originates in the body and affects the mind is called **somo-psychic**. No disease is purely somatic or psychic, either it is born on account of the imbalance of prana or the imbalance of mind. Therefore, in hatha yoga, what we are trying to do is to create a balance, to bring both the energies into a balanced state, and thereby allow the healing to take place.

## **How the yoga works**

Yoga therapy, according to the scientific understanding, takes place on account of the balancing effect which is created by the yoga postures in the nervous system. And by creating a balance in the nervous system, regulation of the endocrines is effected. This is a very simple theory.

Another important point which is misinterpreted in many books concerns the practice of pranayama. They say you store up more oxygen in order to maintain a higher energy level. However, this is not true scientifically. You can store carbon in the body, but you can't store oxygen, because oxygen is a combustible gas. It will create the process of catabolism, and burn away all the tissues of the body. Other researchers and yogis have found in sirshasana the rate of ventilation in the brain is increased three to four times, while the overall consumption of oxygen in the body is reduced to a minimum. So when you do sirshasana you are taught to assimilate maximum oxygen from minimum intake.

In meditation you also consume very little oxygen. When the mind slows and external awareness is diminished, the body becomes quiet and thought vibrations stop. At this time the consumption of oxygen falls very low; that is why they say in yoga you increase the lifespan because you do not exhaust the oxygen stock, the vital capacity, within you.

Another important thing they found was that during sirshasana all the organs and lower limbs of the body were relieved of tension. Ordinarily they are under tension because of their weight. Anything that has weight is pulled down by gravity. However, when you are in sirshasana, the centre of gravity is shifted and there is a counterbalance. The uterus which was pulling downward, pulls the other way. The same applies to the intestines and all other abdominal organs. Of course, if you remain in sirshasana for all the twenty four hours, it is not going to be of any help. But it is relaxing for the whole system if performed for a period of five, six or seven minutes.

Through the practice of sirshasana you can influence the menstrual flow by rebalancing the pituitary, which is considered to be the master gland. Twenty two groups of hormones are produced by the posterior pituitary alone; I am not talking about the anterior pituitary. These hormones, if not carefully balanced, can create any negative symptom in the body. The regulation and health of the pituitary can be maintained by the practice of sirshasana, because during headstand pose, the circulation of blood to the brain

is greatly increased. When you maintain proper circulation in the pituitary gland, it remains healthy.

### **Can we stop the heart?**

Coming to a very important point: many times in India we read in the newspapers that some yogi has gone into an underground samadhi, which is completely sealed off, and he remains there for five, ten or fifteen days. In the beginning many thought this was a fraud because they had no way to check it. No one knew for sure whether these yogis were still breathing inside there or not. But now, scientists are able to record the physical parameters through the use of electronic equipment. They can find out if the heart is still functioning, if the radial pulse is working, if there is some sort of movement; what happens to the breath. Now everything can be examined.

How does one stop the heart, and how does he restore the activity of the heart? Is it possible? If so, then several new chapters will have to be added to our medical books to show that heart attack can be averted. And once an attack has taken place, the heart can be restored to normal function. What actually happens when a person has been declared clinically dead for ten days, and then he comes back to life? How does that restoration take place? In yoga it is said that when the mind drops, the breath also drops. That is the state called kevala kumbhaka. It means spontaneous retention of breath. The moment the mind becomes active, the breath is also resurrected, because the mind and the breath are two companions. They live together, move together, fly together and die together. If you resurrect the prana, you resurrect the mind; if you resurrect the mind, you resurrect the prana.

Some yogis start by controlling the pranas, they are called hatha yogis. Others start with the mind, they are called raja yogis. Through the mind, you can influence the prana, that is raja yoga. Through the prana, you can influence the mind, that is hatha yoga.

### **The role of ajna chakra**

In yoga there is a small but very important gland situated; behind the eyebrow centre above the medulla oblongata. Physiologically it is termed the pineal, but in tantra they call it ajna chakra. Ajna means 'monitor or command'. Ajna chakra is therefore known as the commanding centre.

If you concentrate at the eyebrow centre, gradually your pranas become focussed and centralised, and you begin to see a small light. It is like a halo. When that halo is there, it means that ajna chakra is contacted. If ajna is not contacted, you will not see the light there. You will feel some pressure, but you will not see the light. When you are able to see a constant glow of light, sometimes oval, sometimes round, that means ajna chakra is coming under your influence; that is point one.

Point two: The more the light glows, the more the breath is suspended. And there is a point when the breath stops altogether; you don't breathe at all, there is no breath. And when there is no breath, after some time, the heart stops, but consciousness remains. That is the key. You are not physically functioning, but you are aware. And what is that awareness? Just illumination, that is all. There is no name and form, time and space, only constant awareness of light. As long as the light is there, consciousness will remain, and the prana, the life force, will be there in the seed state.

If at any time the light vanishes, the yogi will die there. Without illumination, no restoration of the heart can take place. So, when the light starts fading, the yogi comes out. He begins to relate himself with time and space. And as soon as he becomes extrovert he rings the bell to signal that the vault should be opened.

Now, that light is the indication of two things. Firstly, that the prana is still in the body in the unmanifest state. And secondly, that the yogi is aware of the light, and of himself. This is due to the influence of ajna chakra.

### **The monitoring system**

In yoga, there is a strong emphasis placed on the development of ajna chakra. Concentration on the eyebrow centre is known as shambhavi mudra. It can also be developed through trataka, There are other ways as well. If you can learn to handle ajna chakra properly, you can control all the different systems in the body: nervous system, endocrine, respiratory, circulatory, digestive, and excretory systems, everything can be managed, and that is the exact methodology of yoga. Of course, we do **asana, pranayama, mudra, bandha, meditation, concentration, relaxation**, but the main and most important point is that we learn to master this gland called the pineal, which is the seat of ajna chakra. The pituitary gland is the disciple. Pineal gland is the guru. This should be the relationship. As long as this relationship is abiding, everything goes all right. But when the pineal gland becomes subservient to the pituitary, then you have

emotional, mental, psychic and physical problems. Thyroid overacting/ underacting, adrenals overacting/underacting, metabolism totally out of balance, and you do not know exactly what is happening. You take drug after drug, antibiotics, sedatives, tranquillisers. Doctors do not know exactly what is wrong either, because they are only taught to treat this body as bone, marrow, blood and flesh. They are unable to deal with the diseases at a subtler level.

In yoga, we consider this body as a manifestation of two basic energies - mind and prana. To maintain a balance between these two, the pineal should be strengthened by concentration on ajna chakra

### **Asanas and Stress**

Asanas greatly influence the functioning of the endocrine system. We know the important role the endocrine glands play during stress adaptation, by secreting the stress hormones. There is such an intricate relationship between the glands that one malfunctioning gland can cause the disruption of the whole system.

Asanas bring about harmony in the functioning of the various other bodily systems, which are closely 'interwoven, such as the circulatory, nervous, respiratory, and digestive systems. Any disruption in the proper working relationship between these systems results in loss of health and body efficiency. Here again, all these systems play an active role during the body's adaptation to stress.

The subtle influence asanas bring about in the body is in the pranamaya kosha or the energy sheath. Pranamaya kosha is pervaded by what is known as bio-plasma or bioluminescence or prana, which the Kirlians had photographed for the first time. This energy travels in and around the body in specific pathways or the nadis, creating the aura around the bodies. These nadis or pathways become easily blocked, and prana gets congested in certain areas. When this happens, it leads to physical and mental disorders. Prana is also intimately connected to the mind. The free flow of prana brought about by asanas, leads to mental equilibrium and calmness.

Rapid and irregular breathing signifies tension in the mind and body, whereas slow, deep and rhythmical breathing indicates both calmness in the mind and good health. The practice of asana brings about mental and emotional equanimity, by slowing down the breathing, and by deepening the inhalation and exhalation.

Finally, the practice of asana with body and breath awareness, keeps the mind off tension and worry, at least during the practice. However, the temporary relaxation achieved during the practice, gradually builds up to bring permanent changes in one's mental and emotional makeup. As our mental attitude is reflected in our body, in the same way physical poise achieved during the practice of asanas has a corresponding effect on the mind.

### **Pawanmuktasana**

The pawanmuktasana practices are taught preliminary to the practice of asanas, and are divided into

- a) the anti-rheumatic group; and
- b) the anti-gastric group.

'Pawan' means 'wind', 'mukta' means 'release' and the pawanmuktasana group of exercises releases excess of wind and acidity from the body.

Though in practice, these seem very simple, they exercise subtle effects on the different joints and organs of the body. That's why these are known as sukshma vyayama or subtle exercise in Sanskrit.

Along with the excess wind and acidity, the practice also removes or releases muscular tension from all over the body, from the head to the toes, and balances the pranas in the body. This in turn helps to keep the body balanced and stress-free throughout the day.

### **Surya namaskara**

Asanas directly or indirectly influence and stimulate the endocrine system, which plays a key role during the body's adaptation to stress. However, no single practice influences the body-mind complex to the same extent as surya namaskara does. It can be considered as stress management in a capsule!

The practice of surya namaskara has three major aspects: **form, energy and rhythm**. **The twelve postures** in surya namaskara create the physical matrix around which the form of the practice is woven. These postures generate prana, the subtle energy which activates the psychic body. Their performance in a steady, rhythmic sequence reflects the rhythms of

the universe, and the biorhythms of our own body. The rhythmic superimposition of this form and energy, on our present body-mind complex is the transforming force which generates the nucleus of a fuller and more active life and a greater appreciation of the richness of the world we live in.

In the subtle body of man, there are seven major psychic centres called chakras. They have their physical representation in the various nerve plexuses and the endocrine glands. The activation of these psychic centres through surya namaskara proceeds mainly through the development of internal awareness, concentration and visualisation.

Each of the twelve poses in surya namaskara has its own mantra which is mentally repeated for greater benefit. The actual physical stimulation from each pose enhances prana shakti, allowing us to better focus and concentrate our mental and physical energies at the chakra location. It is this dual aspect of taking our mental awareness to a highly charged physical structure which leads to a fusion of mind and body, ida and pingala.

The forward and backward physical movements in surya namaskara alone are enough to stimulate our metabolic rate to release energy. When these are combined with chakra stimulation, then the effects get enhanced.

The spinal cord, the link between the brain and the body is the conduit for all our energies. Within it are the ida and pingala nadis, so its health is of paramount importance. Surya namaskara, being an active and dynamic series, exerts its major influence on pingala nadi, especially when it is practised quickly. However, when practised slowly and completely with chakra awareness and mantra repetition, surya namaskara stimulates both ida and pingala almost equally. In the slower version, the technique transforms itself from a series of asanas to a series of mudras, leading to a more balanced development. As we analyse each of the poses in surya namaskara, we understand the tremendous therapeutic influence that is brought on stress, through a combination of asanas, pranayama, chakra awareness and mantra repetition.

### **Cleansing of the body**

According to the ancient science of ayurveda, all the body functions are controlled by three humors: kapha (mucus or phlegm), vata (gas or wind) and pitta (acid or bile). The first step to balancing the pranas is regulation of the humors. When we cleanse the body internally from time to time, we remove the excesses of these three metabolic products,

thereby regulating their formation and balancing the proportion of each. However, in order to cleanse the body of these excesses, we have also to cleanse the nadis or the energy pathways.

**Hatha yoga** traditionally prescribes the shatkarmas or six ways of purifying the body; neti, dhauti, basti, nauli, kapalbhati and trataka. These are not mutually exclusive, but are practised in different combinations to suit the specific nature of disorder and individual need. The very fact that so many methods and techniques of cleansing the body have been developed, and are being practised, shows the great importance which hatha yoga attaches to the health of the body.

**Neti** is a process of cleansing the nasal passages of all impurities, including engrained dry mucus which can remain inside. On another level, the practice of neti has a subtle influence on the various nerves which end in the nasal passages, such as the olfactory bulb and other adjacent nerves, which enervate the eyes, ears, nose and throat. This has a soothing influence on the brain, and can help to relieve such stress-related ailments as migraine, asthma, depression, tension headaches, insomnia and tiredness.

We know how alternate nostril breathing has a balancing influence on the two hemispheres of the brain. The practice of neti has a similar effect, and induces harmony and balance throughout the central nervous system, as well as the systems that govern the respiratory, circulatory and excretory functions. Neti also enhances the efficiency of the frontal lobes of the cerebrum, which is responsible for the higher mental faculties.

**Dhauti** consists of several stomach washing techniques. **Kunjali** is the technique of cleansing the stomach by voluntary vomiting after drinking six glasses of warm salt water. Kunjali helps to remove acidity, gas and excess mucus from the stomach, and tones and stimulates all the abdominal organs. It removes the symptoms of stress and tension by stimulating the vagus nerve which triggers the parasympathetic nervous system and thereby, the relaxation response.

On the psychic level, kunjali strengthens the solar plexus or manipura chakra. The vomiting reflex pulls the prana up from the mooladhara chakra to the throat, and stimulates vishuddhi chakra. The upward movement of prana activates all the chakras within the vertebral column, and the surrounding nadis. Nerve impulses rush up from the base of the spine to the medulla oblongata and ajna chakra.

**Shankhprakashalana** is another widely used dhauti technique. Shank means 'conch' and prakshalana means 'to wash completely'. This practice helps to wash the conch shaped intestines. It is a systematic and gentle method of completely washing the entire alimentary canal from the mouth to the anus. How shankhprakashalana helps to remove stress? Toxic build-up in the digestive system produces a digestive stress, eventually resulting in different types of digestive disorders. These toxins are also circulated to other parts of the body where they again become a cause of stress and imbalance. By cleaning the entire digestive tract, we eliminate one of the major causes of physical stress, imbalance and disease, and thereby promote the health of the entire body.

**Kapalbhati** removes impurities from the frontal region of the brain and makes the mind calm. The most outstanding benefit of this practice is the reversal of nerve reflexes. Normal breathing is characterised by active contraction of only the inspiratory muscles, such as the diaphragm and the external intercostals; expiration occurs passively on the cessation of this contraction of the internal intercostal. Kapalbhati reverses this process: exhalation is active and inhalation is passive. This induces a reversal in the flow of the nerve impulses to and from the brain, bringing about stimulation and awakening of the brain centres.

**Trataka** We have seen earlier (in Brain, the Controller), how mental concentration has a strong influence on the pineal gland and the sympathetic nervous system (since the eye is directly connected to the pineal gland via the sympathetic nervous system), and the hypothalamus and, through the hypothalamus, the wake fullness in an individual. When these centres are stimulated during the practice of trataka, the mind becomes steady and still, while all disturbing or stressful thoughts are blocked.

## **Therapeutics and Yoga**

If it is true that 'yoga starts where medicine stops' then why this article? It is precisely because yoga is not only a therapeutic but a discipline, that it deserves interest from the medical profession. Nobody would contest the fact that modern medicine has achieved amazing progress in many fields. Every day new discoveries and medical techniques appear. Surgery undertakes and succeeds in some amazingly daring operations, and antibiotics give more and more control over infectious diseases. Nobody can deny, however, that in the field of degenerative diseases, starting with cardiovascular complaints, medicine is the least equipped.

This is because these diseases result from years of all sorts of mistakes in lifestyle and the permanent stress that is produced by civilized life. As long as people happily trespass the most elementary rules of life, medicine will not be able to fully play its part in this particular field. It is true that sports and hygiene are used to palliate the drawbacks of sedentary living. Yoga, however is far more comprehensive, providing solutions which are original and tested over millenniums. To better understand the principles behind the techniques proposed by yoga, let us examine acupuncture, another oriental discipline which at first glance doesn't show any analogy with yoga.

**Acupuncture**, which is openly a therapeutic, postulates the existence of a polarized energy animating and circulating through the human body, following certain lines or meridians, not reducible to the anatomic structure known in modern medicine. In acupuncture disease is said to result from a disturbance of the energy body. When the energy circulates wrongly, accumulates in excess or is insufficient, disease occurs. The implantation of gold or silver needles in the well known points stimulates or redistributes the energy and health is recovered.

Yoga bases its action on a similar principle. The energy, called chi in acupuncture is called prana in yoga. Prana is a term covering all energy able to act in any being, every kind of energy known or still to be discovered. Yogis have a dynamic concept of the human state in its totality. They conceive it as an energy transformer. Even the mind is considered to be a modality of the energy force manifested in a human being; there is continuity between all levels of existence in man.

In acupuncture the implantation of needles acts on the patient, who doesn't take any active role. In yoga, however, the patient himself modifies and controls all his physical and mental energies with the help of asanas, pranayama and meditation techniques. Every living being is constantly going through energy transformations, but this process is ordinarily not within one's conscious control. Yoga starts when there is deliberate control of this process. This explains the physical achievements of yogis proven by the experiments of such eminent researchers as doctor Therese Brosse.

## **Asanas**

The main objective of asanas is to stimulate and harmonize the circulation of energies and increase their absorption. Of course, at the same time they also bend the spine forwards

and backwards, or twist it to ensure total flexibility and stimulation of the nerve centres of the spinal cord and the sympathetic system. Asanas are performed in a relaxed way, with breath control and concentration on specific points; the final pose can be held for one or more minutes.

### **Effects of asanas.**

Bearing in mind that the same principles are behind practically all the yogic postures, we will use one basic posture called sarvangasana, the shoulder stand, for an example. It is an inverted pose, having important repercussions on the circulation, and one that is often practiced in gymnastics. Holding it for one minute or more results in a series of physiological effects that we wouldn't get if we only held it for a few seconds. The accompanying diagram shows the final position in which the adept relaxes and breathes as slowly and deeply as possible.

### **Effects on blood circulation**

This inverted pose has a deep influence on the blood circulation, venous as well as arterial, requiring from the adept only a minimum effort, that of holding the posture once he has assumed it. It is gravity that does the actual work.

The vertical position is exclusive to human beings and from the perspective of evolution, it is a recent adaptation. In quadruped mammals, the torso stays parallel to the ground and consequently gravity acts uniformly. In man, however, the circuit being vertical makes the influence of gravity more powerful. It particularly affects the venous circulation below the level of the heart, especially the lower parts. In fact, for blood to flow up again towards the heart and then back towards the lungs, it must fight against gravity. This process is aided by the contractions of the muscles that compress the veins, whilst walking, for example, but now the civilized person walks less and less. In old times when man still lived in nature, the fight for survival compelled him to exercise enough to ensure this return of venous circulation. Among sedentary civilized people, insufficient muscular contractions due to lack of exercise result in a venous stasis or slowing down of circulation in the legs and abdominal organs. Venous circulation is aided in its return to the heart by the sucking action of the diaphragm and the lungs. Here also, sedentary man is the loser since his breathing is superficial and the role of vacuum pump played by the lungs is reduced to its simplest expression.

In quadruped animals the organs remain in place because they are suspended from the spine like clothes hanging on a line to dry. In civilized man the abdominal wall is often not strong enough to keep the organs in place, which doesn't help the blood circulation. One minute in sarvangasana, however, allows large amounts of stagnant blood to be recycled by the effects of gravity. Along with this we can add the effects of the vacuum pump of the lungs, since the practitioner breathes deeply in the final pose.

In parts of the body situated above the heart level, it is the arterial blood that must fight against gravity. . . and against the necktie and shirt collar that are often too tight. The civilized person is cerebral. In sarvangasana an important flow of blood goes towards the head, giving the brain a good rinse. It is not surprising that after a day of intense mental work, one or two minutes in this posture will completely refresh you.

### **Endocrine glands**

A magazine Yoga Mimansa has shown that yoga postures act strongly on the endocrine glands. In sarvangasana, the compression of the chin against the sternum acts on the thyroid. This action may be insufficient to provide a major therapeutic reaction in the case of pathological disturbances of this gland, but it is sufficient to stimulate and maintain the thyroid in a state of optimal functioning.

It is quite obvious that the above mentioned effects would occur only in a very superficial and short term way if the posture is held for only a few seconds. Holding the pose for a minute or more evidently intensifies these effects, but it is still true that considerable benefits can be achieved which would have been hard to obtain from any ordinary form of exercise, in the same amount of time and especially with so little muscular effort. This last point is particularly important because the blood is circulated without any strain on the heart. Yoga doesn't involve any violent muscular effort. This point is especially important for sedentary people whose muscles are usually weak and untrained.

### **Awareness and relaxation**

Another aspect must be approached now, an essential aspect, when all our activities are oriented towards the outside world all day long. Yoga is, by definition, a method of developing inner awareness. While performing the posture the aspirant directs all his

attention to what is happening in the inside world. He makes an effort to listen to his body, to become aware of it, to feel it living. He goes inside the particular places where the posture acts with more intensity. For the yogis, this active participation of the conscious mind is one of the essential elements of yoga. It is this that harmonizes the circulation of the subtle energies which we spoke about previously.

Muscular relaxation also plays an important role. The exercises have to be performed and the attitudes maintained with a minimum of muscular effort, using only the muscles that are necessary to hold the posture. This not only creates a feeling of relaxation, in fact real relaxation, but confers to the adept a better control of his muscular system even in his everyday actions.

### **The advantages**

This muscular relaxation; deeper, slower breathing; activation of the blood circulation, adding to the action on the spine (which we have hardly mentioned but is important in other postures); becoming more aware of the body creating a better psychomotor coordination, are indeed optimally evident during the yoga session. Through regular practice the aspirant gains maximum benefits and efficiency extending little by little to every moment of the day, even when he forgets his yoga. The yoga adept thus has less anxiety, let's say no anxiety at all anymore.

This undoubtedly explains the extraordinary development of yoga in all industrialized countries. Yoga also has the advantage of not requiring stadiums or costly equipment to practice. It can be practiced at home on a simple blanket folded in two!

Nevertheless, for most of us, yoga is not an absolute therapeutic. Should an infection occur, medicine still has the first word. When the danger is over, yoga can be usefully employed for the recovery of health. This allows us to conclude that even if yoga **'starts where medicine stops'**, it constitutes a positive gain to its practitioners. We can be sure that if yoga didn't give him 'something' he would have stopped long ago. It is definitely not an attraction for the exotic that makes him sacrifice his precious leisure time to the practice of yoga.