

# Beyond Asana

Somewhere between the extremes of effort and surrender lies the harmonious equilibrium called yoga. Holding both extremes at the same time, we essentially short-circuit conditioned mind with its habitual patterns. If what we mean by yoga is “union”, then the foundations of Ashtanga yoga provide a valuable tool to experience this dynamic balance of opposites. So we look for the middle path: not too tight, not too loose.

Practice is like a map: we have to start from where we are. It is difficult to see ourselves clearly without a formal discipline to learn about our tendencies. Transformation occurs not in denying or resisting, but in accepting and allowing. Bringing the body back into alignment with the natural flow of breath, we harmonize the organism with the surrounding environment.

Posture, or *asana*, when aligned with breath, *bandha* and *dristi* helps to release stagnant energy in the body and mind. The slightest misalignment in posture can inhibit the free flow of breath, preventing the mind from resting completely. Learning to breathe deeply not only relaxes the body, but also helps focus the mind. Ashtanga practice shows the practitioner how to breathe deeply, and then, to sit quietly.

What distinguishes practice from performance? Curiosity, “Beginner’s Mind”, a childlike attitude of wonder. Asking, “What is this all about?” instead of, “How can I get it right?” Practice has no goal, which frustrates ego. In the absence of ego’s drive to reinforce its existence, there is not much to say. Ego says, “I know.” Beginner’s mind says, “Really? Huh!” Ego says, “Look at me!” Beginner’s mind says nothing, quietly taking it all in. Ego is anything that takes you out of the direct experience of the present moment. Pride and self-congratulations are its ambassadors. Humbleness is ego’s antidote.