



THE LITTLE BOOK OF THE BANDHAS

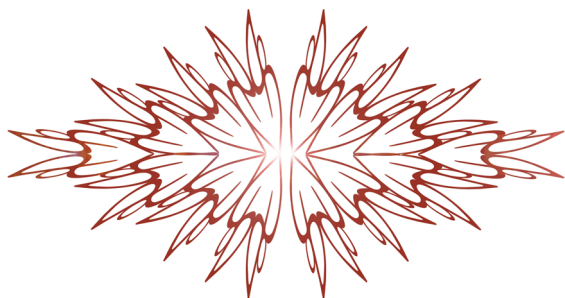
INTEGRATING YOGA
POSTURE PRACTICE



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a somatic invitation to freedom



by

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PREFACE

Yoga is neither religion nor philosophy: it does not depend on logic, assumption, metaphysical speculation or belief. It is a practical expression of the deepest possibilities of the human condition, and is based directly on immediate experience. On the basis of action we become able to replace the vulnerability, isolation and anxiety that come from resisting life as it actually happens, with a total trust in the wholeness of life just as it is.

Yoga can be experience, state, process or practice. As experience or state it is unity, within which all separation has dissolved into the indivisibility of wholeness. As process or practice it is union, within which all separable parts are harmonised into a single whole. At the heart of yoga as both state and practice is integration: functional, structural, physiological, energetic and spiritual. Yoga posture practice is the most integrated of all yoga practices, depending equally on the direct, and integrated, participation of body (sensation), mind (interpretation) and spirit (consciousness).

Yoga posture practice is also perhaps the most potent and rewarding activity that human ingenuity has ever developed. Without any special tools, it can provide us with mobility, energy, strength, grace, stamina, calmness, vitality, health, alertness, concentration, confidence and clarity. All these, and more, are made available simply by systematically and sensitively rearranging the relationships between our body parts. What we are looking for is integration. Beginning with actions that we take it extends by way of functional integrity and structural integration to energetic and spiritual integration. These different layers of integration all depend upon the muscular activity taking place in and as the whole body. This integrated muscular activity is nothing other than the bandhas.

INTRODUCTION

Over millions of years life has produced millions of forms through which to express itself. Amongst all these the human being is completely unique: in both design and capacity. At the heart of the awesome potential of being human is our spine. While we are by no means the first of life's vertebrates, we are the only one whose natural stance is the vertical one. This is the key to our remarkable cognitive, creative and cultural achievements: not least amongst which is yoga posture practice. The spine, and its verticality, is also the key to yoga posture practice. In fact, yoga posture practice that does not focus effectively on the spine and the functional and structural vulnerabilities of its verticality, can be little more than an unfulfilled promise.

While spinal verticality made possible the development of the cerebral cortex and its awesome powers, it brings with it hidden weaknesses. These weaknesses are structural and based on the impact of gravity which always pulls downwards towards the ground. Being vertical is a natural constraint to spinal lengthening, each vertebra being drawn continuously towards those beneath by gravity.

This downwards pressure accumulates functionally in the lower back, and structurally in the sacroiliac joints. This is especially so when the overall musculature of the body is weak, as in the case of those, like us, who lead a sedentary life. It is not until a human being stops growing in early adulthood that this is much of a problem. Until then the momentum of life expresses itself so powerfully as physical growth, movement and action that gravity is rarely able to impose functional or structural inertia without the help of an accident or extreme indolence.

Once we stop growing it is another story. Not least because adulthood usually brings to most of us far less active movement than we enjoyed in childhood. The grace and ease of movement we enjoy as children is rare amongst adults that have not dedicated themselves to some form of physical training.

Without constant use human musculature weakens and their tensile support is lost to the spine which becomes vulnerable to the impact of gravity as

compression, especially in the lower back. Functional inertia soon becomes structural inertia. Basing yoga posture practice on the bandhas is the most potent and fruitful response to this unavoidable challenge; one that brings physiological, neurological, energetic and spiritual gifts along with its functional and structural benefits. The breadth and depth of these benefits makes it vital to approach yoga posture practice with a clear understanding of what the bandhas are, and more importantly, how they must be done.

Mulabandha, uddyanabandha and jalandharabandha are most effectively accessed by fully lengthening the spine. The spine can not be fully lengthened however without the direct and full support of the limbs, where we engage hastabandha and padabandha. The functional implication of the bandhas is that the whole body is acting as one (yoga). The structural implication of the bandhas is that each part of the body is simultaneously stable, free and supporting every other part of the body. The bandhas are in fact nothing less than the functional keys to structural and energetic integration: or alignment.

There is nothing esoteric or mystical about the bandhas, however remarkable and profound their effects may well be. They are based directly in the singular active power of the body: muscular contraction. If we are unable to clearly recognise the crucial role of muscular contraction in all of our activities, we will never be able to enjoy the benefits of yoga posture practice or know the real power and significance of the bandhas. At the heart of this power is the possibility of genuine happiness, based on a complete trust in life as it actually is, without any subservience to unverifiable beliefs, hopes and fears.

THE INDIVISIBLE WHOLENESS OF LIFE

No matter where we look, we are looking at life. When we look into space we see its roots. When we look at a silicon chip we see its fruits. Life is only possible on this planet because our solar system formed exactly the way that it did within this spiral galaxy in its particular universe over billions of years. This is a significant legacy for us to inherit. We are not here by our own power, but as an agent of life. The most sophisticated, promising, dangerous agent life has so far produced.

Issuing from the slow and patient womb of life, being human partakes directly of her qualities. While the most obvious of these may be the diversity and complexity of life, they mask a more fundamental and significant simplicity and unity. At heart life, and being human, is an indivisible wholeness from which nothing can be taken away, and to which nothing can or need be added. The indivisibility of this wholeness does not reveal itself easily to the fragmenting tendency of the human mind. Nonetheless it is present and continuously expressing itself.

As human beings it expresses itself through the human body, which is the finest fruit of more than three thousand million years of evolution. Your body is more than the tool you use it as. It is also the most intelligent and creative expression of the indivisible wholeness of life through which it most potently and consciously expresses itself. It is only through the human mind that life has become clearly enough aware of itself to be troubled by the dualities of life and death. We are the mind of life reflecting upon itself through the sophisticated neural circuitry of our bodies. Body, mind and consciousness meet in us, and only in us can their inherent unity be revealed.

This revelation is yoga, and it is to this underlying unity that the word yoga itself most directly and deeply points. For it is only from the sense of separation that union is necessary or possible. The experience of our separateness dissolving is one of reunification with something bigger and deeper. Yet this is a momentary experience that brings us back to the ground overlooked within the sense of separateness.

What we are brought back to is no sense of self or other, better or worse, differentiation or separation. This is unity, within which all oppositions are resolved, all dualities dissolved. This unity is yoga and is always present, though overlooked, even within our sense of separation. It does not have to be achieved or accomplished, only found and recognised. There is perhaps

no more powerful way to find and recognise this than the application of the bandhas to yoga posture practice.

The unity³ of life is expressed and mirrored in the intrinsic unity of being human: the inherent identity of body, mind and spirit. The human body is the outer sheath within and through which the unity of life expresses itself as the awesome potential of being human. It is here, in the body, that yoga uncovers and honours the inherent unity of being human. There is no escape from this. Even the deepest meditation of the most accomplished mystic takes place in the human body. The separations that we can make between mind, body and spirit, between impulse and reason, between desire and intent are made in the mind, by way of the brain. They do not actually exist anywhere else.

It took Einstein to show us that matter and energy differ only in degree, it takes the bandhas to show us that energy and consciousness differ in exactly the same way. If the human body, in its indivisible wholeness, cannot be seen to be a natural, organic temple, mosque, synagogue, cathedral yoga will elude us and be replaced by twisted mythologies of hope, frustration and despair. There is no more potent recipe for despair than to separate body from mind, to set the physical against the spiritual. Within the unity of life, body and mind, matter and spirit are the front and back, the indivisible cover and content of being human.

BODY MIND AND SPIRIT

Despite its enormous success the human body still remains a mystery to those who have no key to unlock its secret. Yet to those who have there is no mystery about the relationship between body, mind and spirit. To clarify the relationship between body, mind and spirit we must plunge into the depths of our body. We do this by becoming as sensitive and responsive as possible to the sensations being generated by our practice. As specific sensations become familiar we become less fascinated by them and tend to notice them less. Then, if we are still interested in what is actually happening inside us, our attention is taken deeper and deeper. We start to notice, identify and recognise the implications of deeper and more subtle sensations. Eventually we find ourselves absorbed in a depth of perception, in a realm of experience, that seems to have very little to do with our recognised senses. We find ourselves

³ *the singularity of its indivisible wholeness*

in the depths of the 'subtle body' encountering qualities and energies that rarely participate in conscious human experience.

As we become more intimate with the sensations actually taking place in and as our body, we begin to feel them more clearly, more directly. As we follow the flow of sensation inwards we soon begin to recognise that we are simultaneously following the contours of mind. We begin to realise that the conscious sensations being generated in and as the body are being interpreted in and as mind. As our experience of sensation becomes more direct, more immediate, more intimate these interpretations become more simple and concrete. The more intimate we become with sensation, with the body, the more accurate and direct mind becomes in its interpretations. In doing so it becomes more focussed, more present, more quiet. The activity of mind begins to reflect more directly, and more consistently the activity of the body, and the intelligence of consciousness. As we recognise this we are actually becoming intimate with mental activity, with mind. Intimacy with body as sensation necessitates and generates intimacy with mind as perception. A conscious sensation is always a perception, an event taking place as and in both body and mind.

We begin to see that any experience of sensation always involves interpretation. We recognise that mind must participate in the recognised presence of the body. We realise that mind and body are synchronous in our experience of sensation, in our experience in general. We begin to experience and realise body as a function of mind. This is not a matter of definition, but of how we experience it. We cannot experience our finger without mind imposing its interpretation on the sensations we are experiencing at the end of our hand.

In our conscious experience of the body, mind and body are one. Yet they are not alone in this unity. Something else is showing the way. We can not feel, think, know anything without awareness. Awareness is the light of consciousness, necessary to all conscious experience. By becoming intimate with sensation we are not only becoming intimate with mind. We also become intimate with consciousness itself.

In yoga posture practice we are dealing primarily with the flow of changing sensations and their ongoing interpretations. As our attention internalises specific sensations begin to become more and more clear. They stand out from others more and reveal their inherent, differentiating characteristics more clearly. They take on their own definite, particular qualities. Then, as we

become even more intimate with them, they begin to lose their definiteness, their distinctiveness.

This happens to all sensations. As we approach them they begin to stand out, but as we get even closer they begin to fade. When the gap between observer and observed is as close as it can be while the two remain, all sensations reveal the same inherent, subtle qualities. These qualities are those of sensation itself encountered so deeply that the limits of differentiation have been reached and we are left in the soft, warm, spacious delight of nothing in particular. This is the ground of sensation itself, which is nothing other than the recognised presence of consciousness itself.

Within this intimacy it becomes delightfully clear that just as body is not separate from mind, it is not separate from consciousness either. We realise that the distinctions between body, mind and consciousness are functional conventions necessary to deliberate navigation, but not defining the way things actually are.

Consciousness is the context within which all existence takes place, as well as the context within which all awareness takes place. It is consciousness that we finally encounter when we become so intimate with particular sensations that we encounter sensation itself. Within this encounter we are experiencing the inherent unity of body, mind and spirit. A unity, or wholeness, which is fundamental to any and all of the functional differences that the mind can, and must, make in order for it to learn to navigate the world.

THE EXPERIENCE OF WHOLENESS

Our experience of life, of the world is one of unique events and discrete actions involving individual objects. It is one of fragmentation, separateness, individuality, autonomy. Yet this is actually only the surface appearance. Every event and action is actually a unique node in an indivisible wholeness⁴ of actions and events binding every object into a seamless unity. Locked in to our sense of separation on the surface of life as we are by effort, tension and habit we lose sight of the indivisible wholeness of this totality. We think and act as if fragmentation is the nature of reality, and causation is as local as our

⁴ classically known in India as *Indra's net*

awareness is superficial⁵. We have only incoherent notions about how things actually happen.

As we become intimate with body, mind and consciousness we start to feel the support of everything around us, even the things we don't understand or enjoy. Within the trust that this generates we clearly recognise the totally conditioned nature and universal origin of all our thoughts, feelings and actions. This allows us to see through the illusion of local origination and limited causation. We feel and see clearly the inextricable, irreplaceable nature of every element of the matrix of wholeness: object, action and perception. Independence, autonomy and volition reveal their illusory nature. We become able to see that nothing happens by chance or accident: that everything is in its rightful place necessitated by the indivisible wholeness of all that exists. Eventually, perhaps, we see clearly the singular source of every action, and the singular power⁶ functioning through every object. We recognise and become absorbed into the indivisibility of wholeness⁷, no longer insisting on our independent autonomy, feeling fully supported by the flow of life just as it is.

In yoga posture practice we are navigating only a very small, though to us very significant, part of the matrix of wholeness. We are learning to navigate our body so that it can play its part in our life more fully, more satisfyingly. This is not simply a matter of recovering and releasing its potential for movement and action. The body is more than a tool and a vehicle. The human body is the fruit of the long journey of life. The wisdom of life, accumulated during that journey, is encoded into your body at a cellular level. This wisdom is guiding your body, your actions your movements. Life, as your body, knows how to take care of itself: it knows how to use gravity; it knows how to navigate space. You do not need to teach it. What you need to do is access, recognise and honour the inherent intelligence and integrity of your body. The most simple, direct and fruitful way to do this is to activate the bandhas in the whole of your body.

5 for an incisive take on this see the works of Spinoza

6 known by some as the Will of God

7 ishvarapranidanah



In this concise but clear book the anatomy, physiology, neurology, energetics and spirituality of Yoga posture practice are inextricably linked to the subtle muscularity of the bandhas.

It presents the human body as a coherent expression of accessible intelligence, rather than a sophisticated machine. In doing so Godfri explains why and how it is possible to bring integration to the human body and unity to body, mind and spirit through physical action. For the novice and dedicated yogi it provides a precise and detailed guide into the experiential heart of posture practice. The first section explains the history and biomechanics of the bandhas, their centrality to human verticality, their significance as the intelligent response of the body to gravity, their relationship to wholeness and much more besides. The second section provides detailed, step by step, instruction for awakening and developing whole body integrity by way of the bandhas. The final section deals with their impacts, progressing inwards from the anatomical, physiological and neurological benefits to the deeper energetic and spiritual effects.