

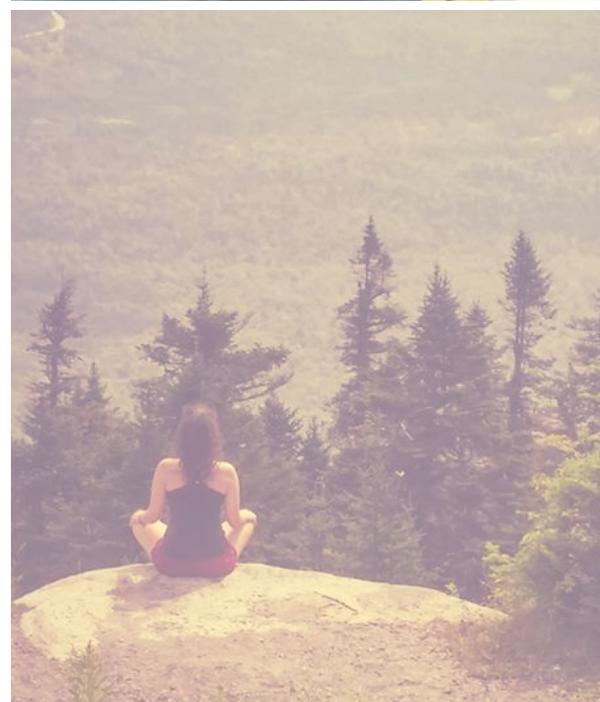


Sylvie Gouin
inspiredlivingwithsylvie.com

What am I supposed to think about in asana practice?

I have been asked this question many times over the years and I love it. For one, the moment we are aware that we are thinking, we are not the thought, we are the observer. Secondly, this acknowledgement of “what shall I think about” is the realization that we get to choose what we will give the gift of our attention to and that’s yoga at its best.

What follows is how I experience and teach the guiding of the mind in an asana context. I begin by describing four steps, but these steps can be viewed more like a circle because as our practice refines, every step also refines. They are:



1. An asana is experienced when the mind and the body are at ease and are stable, so we call on these feelings. We remind ourselves that there is nothing rigid about stability and that ease, not to be confused with easy, is our true nature. Stability and ease create an auspicious internal environment for asana practice and life as a whole. At first for most of us, stability and ease is a concept, but with reflection and practice it becomes an experience. In addition, this type of underlying attitude keeps us internally smiling, which helps find our balance between effort and effortlessness;
2. There is recognition of that something special about asana practice; an opportunity for the mind, body and breath to work together through movement to create a harmonizing internal environment. We salute what is within us that allows us to keep showing up to our practice, we salute our inner teacher (that powerful quality of discernment) and we make the conscious choice to move beyond the habit of judging the body and instead fuel curiosity, leading to the acknowledgement of the magnificence of the body;
3. We pay attention to where our body is in space. For example, in warrior B we feel where our back arm is without having to look at it. Eventually we can do this with more subtle things like in downward facing dog when we lift the sitting bones up towards the sky and tuck the tailbone in. With practice, this mind-body process continuously refines; and
4. To keep the mind focused on the body we need the support of the breath. If the breath is short, shallow and fragmented our thoughts are short, shallow and fragmented and this creates tension in the body. Providing space for the breath helps the mind concentrate and little by little we release mental holding patterns, which allows the body to also release. The more we can feel the breath the more we will eventually be able to feel and guide the prana within the breath. Prana naturally goes where the mind goes. So, if our mind is fragmented prana fuels fragmentation. By stabilizing or directing the mind towards what we value rather than what we fear we naturally release tension and increase stability and ease of body and mind. At first, we are trying to synchronize the breath with the movements, but at one point the breath leads the movement.

Paying Attention

Most of us have not been taught to pay attention to our body. For the most part our relationship with our body is one dimensional. It is about the front of the body and what we see in the mirror. Unless we are body builders, are in pain or are trying a new pair of jeans, we don't think about the back of the body and when it comes to the inside of the body, we leave that to the experts. If we feel pain, we just want it to go away. Through asana we refine our relationship with our body. We notice what we feel and where we feel it. For this to be beneficial it must be in harmony with the attitude of respect and awe or we will fall prey to body obsession. This is when we are always looking for what needs to be tweaked and adjusted and fixed and...So just as not having a mind-body connection leads to imbalances, an overburdened mind-body connection creates different imbalances.

The planet is your yoga mat

The magic of yoga manifests when we start to experience the whole planet as our yoga mat. For example, this stability and ease that we awaken in asana becomes a platform for how we perceive ourselves and our world (i.e., if I am stable and grounded with who I am and if I approach my days with a smile and an openness to possibilities when a big life wind comes and topples me over I don't snap, I bend and that is such a powerful feeling). In my experience, it comes and goes and unfolds like a dimmer. So let's say that when it comes to feeling grounded and caseful when I first started yoga I was about a 10 watt bulb as my practice unfolded it rose up to 20 and 40 and 60 and at times even 80 but then it goes back to 60 and maybe even 40, but it never goes back to 10 and it goes back up much faster than it drops down.

Am I well aligned?

An asana on the mat ignites my asanas (life) off the mat and vice versa. Many are concerned about being well aligned in asana practice. However, our alignment in asana is a representation of our alignment off the mat (where we spend most of our days).

For example, if I spend my days with my head a few centimeters in front of my shoulders and with my shoulders rolled forward I can't expect to come to asana practice and be in that ideal alignment. Therefore, awareness of how I hold my body in what I spend most of my days doing is essential. In addition, if I am a type A person and I come to yoga and want to maintain my go-go-go attitude, regardless of how well aligned I am, I will eventually irritate my body by refusing to allow for ease. So, we understand that awareness and attitude make a world of a difference.

The elements in my asanas

“As within so without; As without so within”. To understand our nature, yogis of the past studied the world of nature and vice versa and one of the important aspects we reflect on is the harmonization of the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and space.

In the context of the asanas this is how I work with the five elements (Keep in mind that I am keeping it short. There is so much more to this):

- The earth represents the importance of creating a stable foundation in all of our asanas. If you practice with me you have often heard me say “there is no flexibility without stability and there is nothing rigid about stability”;
- What would you rather have in your backyard a stagnant body of water or one with flow? Our body is in large part water and flow is essential. The more we connect with the element of water the more we value and create opportunities for fluid movement;
- A regular asana practice requires discipline and well placed discipline creates a form of heat that burns off limiting mental patterns. The asanas themselves create physical heat which reduces excess physical tissue. In addition, when we practice asana we develop concentration (supported by drishti) which creates another form of positive internal heat that enhances mental clarity;

- We all know that we can't just inhale life and we can't just exhale life. Life is a balance of giving and receiving of building and reducing and so on. The breath reminds us of the power of opposition and flow. The inhale is fullness and the exhale is emptiness and when they are in harmony with each other they carry their own power. Physically the breath impacts the nervous systems and the nervous systems impacts the muscles fibres. On a more subtle level the breath carries and abundance of prana and with practice we learn to direct this powerful energy; and
- One of my favourite explanation of air and space is that air is space in movement and space is air in stillness. In asana, the awareness of space can be as simple as imagining that we are giving space to the vertebrae or that we are giving space to the breath or taking the mental space to be on the mat or... To me, space is also about lightness of being.

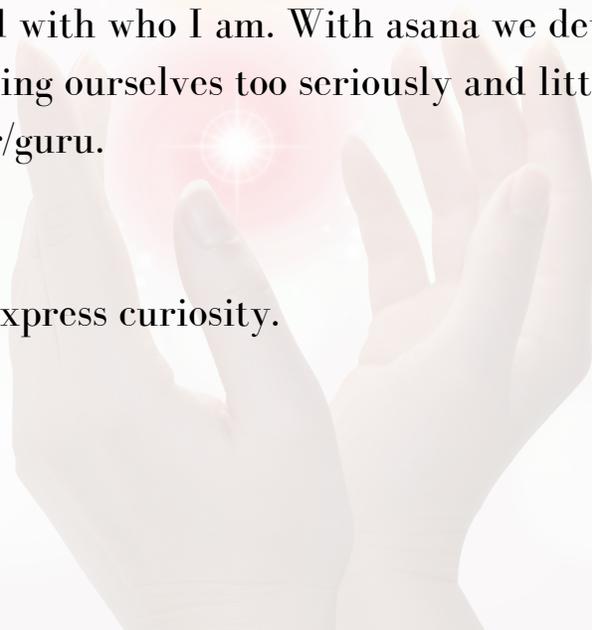
The awareness of the five elements guides the mind and the body towards a harmonization. To much focus on one and we create imbalances. For example, if it's all about earth/stability I will become heavy. If my focus is solely on flexibility I won't have anything to push off from and true flexibility will elude me.

Our Inner Guru

Gu/Darkness Ru/Light is the process of moving from darkness to light. In the context of yoga it's about rising above the belief that I am this body and mind and experiencing our true Self which is beyond the material world. Guru also means heavy, as in grounded with who I am. With asana we develop the ability to feel anchored without taking ourselves too seriously and little by little we unite with our inner teacher/guru.

Listening

We listen. We observe. We express curiosity.



Pranification of our sattvic nature

If you don't know what sattva is, I highly recommend reading my book *Bite-Sized Yoga for Daily Inspiration*. In short, sattva is our harmonized nature. It's that place where we are awake, energized and inspired and move through our day without the need to be manic or in a panic. It is the state where we express ourselves as mindful and responsive human beings rather than reactive and mechanical human doings. In asana practice we learn to intelligently challenge our limitations and we develop an overall energy that is strong and light rather than rigid and bitter or weak and limited or...And this helps to reduce the feelings of heaviness and or scatteredness and we enhance our potential to energize/pranify our sattva.

What do you want from your asana practice?

Let's say all I want from my asana practice is to stretch some muscles so that I can keep running. What I will need to invest (i.e., time, energy) will be different compared to if I have an injury or an ailment and I want yoga to support healing. If I believe that yoga asanas are part of a system that support my ability to awaken, I will need to invest even more. Once we know what we want from our practice we know how to approach it. Yoga does not have to be our everything to be something of great value. But regardless of what my intention for asana practice is, for an asana to be an asana it requires a willingness to contain the mental chatter and direct the prana.

In a nutshell

An asana is a good seat for the mind and the body and a good seat is one that is stable and caseful. In addition, the word asana means "to be." With asana we further understand our own patterns and we create environments to develop and enhance our energy. Directing the mind to stability, ease and curiosity we make space for the breath to flow and that naturally enhances our potential to benefit from the power of caseful concentration.

I could go on, but I will leave it at that...for now :)