



My Background and Approach to Yoga

Learn something today – and tomorrow you will be wiser

*“This is my simple religion.
There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy.
Our own brain, our own heart is our temple;
the philosophy is kindness.”*

H.H. the Dalai Lama XIV

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My Background

People come to yoga in so many different ways. My journey into yoga is probably an unusual one. I started with the philosophy and internal meditative practices and came to the physical practices of asana (or posture work) many years later. I was interested in and drawn towards the philosophy of yoga from my early teens. I was initiated into Surat Shabd Yoga in South Africa in 1984. Surat Shabd Yoga is primarily an internal practice. The principles are very simple. There are only four of them:

- no meat, fish, eggs
- no alcohol or habit forming drugs
- a good, moral up-right life in thought, word and deed
- meditation for two and a half hours a day

With regard to asana or posture practice, I think it is primarily the work of the body, the physical frame. I think if you really want to understand asana, you need to understand anatomy and physiology. How the joints work, how the muscles work, how the nerves, circulation and breathing work. What activities lead to strengthening, what activities lead to damage and what activities lead to health. What moving well feels like and how to do it and to practice towards it; what the stagnation of inactivity feels like and what those activities that engender well-being feel like. Depending on your particular choice of yoga school there may be varying quantities of sweat on your yoga mat - ranging from not much, to a great deal. There may be varying degrees of mention of ethics and morality, of philosophy, of ritual, of scriptural tradition, of spiritual content (by any number of definitions of spirituality), of concepts like *prana* and of 'psychic anatomy' concepts like *chakras*, *nadis*, *koshas* and *granthis*. There may be varying concepts and approaches to consciousness and mental attitude. But fundamentally, work that happens on your yoga mat with attention to the fabric of your anatomy, and your contact with your mat. Your practice starts by unrolling your yoga mat.

On the other hand, and towards the other end of the spectrum, there is Surat Shabd Yoga. (This is not a commonly practiced yoga in Western yoga circles. It is mentioned in the Pradipika in the commentaries on page 505 - "...the surat shabda yoga of Radha Swami".) The meditational component of this practice starts with adopting a position and keeping still. The work of this practice is around engaging the focus of attention, starting to put a rein on the ever-hopping, flit-flitting mind. In my experience, after the first hour or so, the body starts to have an encased, shell-like feeling, like your skin has shelled. I call it 'shelling-out'. This generally allows a deeper focus of attention, a deeper calming, a deeper stilling and centring. It is as if as the skin starts to get that shell-out feeling, the mind starts to accept the rein of holding and starts to still. Just as the work of asana is fundamentally around the fabric of the physical body, I think that this internal work is around the fabric of the mind and what is happening in and around the mind. In this internal work you are dealing with awareness and with your own thought processes. You come to recognise that you can observe your own thinking - thinking and awareness are not one and the same. In this work you are dealing with focus of attention, various concentration techniques, different places of holding a focus of attention, different practices of visualisation. You are dealing with concentration and awareness, and how these interrelate with perception and the senses. You get to look at how memory fits into this picture, and intellect and imagination. How states of consciousness change, like waking, dreaming and deep sleep. What experiences you are likely to face as concentration deepens. In exactly the same way as asana work starts to affect the fabric of your physical body allowing you

to do things with your body that you couldn't before, so too the prolonged, deepening concentration practices start to affect the fabric of the mind, starting with feelings of deep calm and contentment; and shifts in the scope of perception and sensation and the quality of the underlying awareness.

As the external practices of asana start with unrolling your asana mat and then starting to warm up, the internal practices start with placing your cushion in an appropriate spot and finding a comfortable position, then settling to stillness.

This instruction to be still and not move is not unique. For example, you find the same instruction in Zen Buddhism, a practice to which I feel a deep kinship. Have a look at the wonderful *Zazen* practice in the [Handout-and-Downloads](#) menu option off www.DaleSpenceYoga.com

I think some people are drawn to the physical practices, some are drawn to the more internal, contemplative practices. For some, as they drip yet more sweat into their yoga mat, the instruction to "sit still and do not move" would have them running for the hills, screaming. This makes me think of the words of Krishnamacharya. He said,

"The age and the constitution of the students, their vocation, capability and the path to which they feel drawn all dictate the shape of a yoga practice."

There is no single right and wrong here. The practice should fit your inclination. What is your inclination? I think that is a hugely significant question.

For me, I stand with a foot in both camps - both external and internal practice. I love the asana practices and their effect on the body, health and wellbeing. This was one of the threads that prompted me to embark on training in osteopathy and naturopathy, culminating in getting my osteopathy and naturopathy diplomas in 1996. That wanting to better understand health and healing, better understand anatomy, physiology and pathology. I enjoyed the precision of the Iyengar Yoga, the dynamic physicality of the Ashtanga practices of Pattabhi Jois. I have enjoyed and wanted to emulate the impressive practices of the Shadow Yoga of Shandor Ramete. I also resonate with the quieter, freeing practices inspired by Scaravelli, and the dynamic flows of Sadie Nardini.

Yet also I am irresistibly drawn to the internal practices of Surat Shabd Yoga - to be still and ever hone your grip on focus of attention.

There is a time to be active - there is a time to be still. I think this is all about balance. As it says in the Bhagavad-Gita [6:16-17]

"Success in Yoga is not for him who eats too much or too little—nor, O Arjuna, for him who sleeps too much or too little. To him who is temperate in eating and recreation, in his effort for work, and in sleep and wakefulness, Yoga becomes the destroyer of misery."

Consider the Eight Limbs or *Asht Anga* described by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras [2:29]. Briefly, these are:

1. the various forms of abstention from evil-doing (*yamas*)
2. the various observances (*niyamas*)

3. posture (*asana*)
4. control of the prana, control of the breath (*pranayama*)
5. withdrawal of the mind from the sense objects (*pratyahara*)
6. concentration (*dharana*)
7. meditation (*dhyana*)
8. absorption in the Atman (*samadhi*)

In this scheme of yoga practice, the external asana practices lie predominantly in Limb 3. The internal practices of Surat Shabd Yoga lie in Limbs 5-8. Pranayama lies between the two, with elements of both. You can stand with you feet wholly in the external practices and “do pranayama”. There is work with the diaphragm to be done, work with the intercostals muscles, there are bandhas to work with, breathing to work with, breath holds to work with. There are different postures that emphasize in-breaths and different postures for out-breaths, and different parts of the lungs. There is plenty in pranayama to keep it in the realm of ‘physical, external practice’. Yet there is that inevitable link between breath and mind. As the breath settles and calms, so too the mind settles and calms. Pranayama also contains practices involving concentration, focus of attention and visualisation. I think pranayama is inevitably a practice of both external and internal aspect.

As a small digression here, these are described as Patanjali’s ‘Eight Limbs’. The word ‘limbs’ is used, conveying the sense of each one being important and each one being necessary. As opposed to using a word like ‘steps’, which implies having gone past one step you no longer need to pay that step any attention. The first two Limbs are (1) the various forms of abstention from evil-doing (*yamas*) and (2) the various observances (*niyamas*). These together translate very loosely into ‘be kind’, ‘be decent’. I think the practicing of all of the Limbs leads to a balanced development as a human being. This is discussed further in the section *Introduction to Yoga*.

Asana

In my plan of work, I like to use the asana practices for what they are good at - health, strength, flexibility and well being. In asana work there is also inevitably some element of internal work. You need to pay attention to what you are doing, what muscles you are using, what muscles you can let go. Attention to your breath. Attention to your own mental attitude and focus of attention. A balance posture is not likely to go well if your thoughts are wholly in what you are going to do for supper.

The main principle of my asana work is to do what is right for you. You start at the place that you are currently at and progress forward from there. My classes are aimed at making a structural change in our bodies. If you are not very fit and strong now, and you do nothing, then nothing will change. If you start working steadily to improve, then the structure will reflect that activity and you will grow stronger and more flexible. Not too much, not too little. We look at principles of anatomy and physiology, how joints move, what “right movement” feels like, what “wrong movement” feels like. We learn what it feels like to approach the end of range of movement, the quality of that end point, the safe engaging and shifting of that end point. We learn what “safe practice” means, and what is useful and also what is not useful.

The overall aim of the work we do is to increase strength, flexibility and overall health at a pace that is right for you. Then you can be as healthy as you reasonable can be in your life right now. In due

course you will arrive at old age as gracefully and as fit as you can be. I think that is the real acid-test of asana practice.

My drop-in yoga classes are primarily asana classes with some pranayama and relaxation practice.

Pranayama

My pranayama classes and workshops are based on the work of Philip Xerri in the Gitananda tradition. I have developed a progressive series of 12 pranayama workshops, split into four sets of three workshops, each two hours long. The first set of three workshops will focus primarily on the explanations and discussions of the preparatory and classic pranayamas, with some practice of these. These will also include some internal concentration / visualisation work. The second set of three will include material not covered in set one, and more practice and detail of material already covered. The third set of three will also include material not covered in the previous sets, but will have an emphasis on practice and experience of the material already covered. The fourth set of three will be primarily aimed at practice and experience of the material already covered, with little explanation or introduction.

There will be a physical component to all of these. But over the course of the series, increasingly an emphasis on the more internal practices, following the progress of the Limbs of Yoga as laid out in Patanjali's *Ashtanga*. Practices like different concentration and visualisation techniques, followed by spending time feeling our way into them. The first and maybe second set will probably be relevant to most people interested in yoga, like yoga teachers, student teachers, and interested students. The third and fourth sets will probably be most relevant for those drawn to the more internal aspects of yoga practice, or who simply want to get on and practice the material without the accompanying background and explanations of the earlier sets.

Philosophy

Another significant element in my plan of work is around philosophy. I think philosophy underpins everything we do. Why do you think this is right and not that? Why is this good and that bad; and on what do you base this judgment? Where do you stand on life after death, or life before birth? Why do you use a particular scale of reference or set of values? What are the inclinations that underpin your life choices?

This is discussed further in the *Background to Philosophy* menu options and downloads off www.DaleSpenceYoga.com

*As a lamp in a windless place does not flicker,
to such is compared the yogin of controlled mind,
performing the yoga of the Self.*

- Bhagavad-Gita [6:19]

Useful Books – References, bibliography and further reading

[reference above to Pr = *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*]

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