



What Is An Integral Yoga?

Excerpt from Sun, Moon & Earth

By Mas Vidal

The use of the term “integral” was coined by the Bengali guru Aurobindo, and has much broader implications than referring to a yoga of completeness or wholeness. Aurobindo’s use of the word integral¹ has more to do with the complete reformation of man and the integration of the human being into the nature of existence. Aurobindo’s view is much more than a mechanical synthesis of principles and techniques. It involves synthesizing the fabric of human identity into nature and the grander universe. This metaphor is reflected in one of this book’s central points, expressed in the use of the term “mind-body synergy” as a microcosmic perspective on the sun, moon, and earth archetype. This integral vision can also be found in the practical principles of classical yoga, although this requires insight and the lens of soul awareness.

Alternatively, we can see the eight limbs of yoga in the *Ashtanga Yoga Sutras* boldly transition from lifestyle principles in the yamas and niyamas to specific technical practices in steps three through seven. This begins with asana or postures that prepare the spine and hips for the “seat” of meditation. Of all the possible and sometimes contorted body positions, the lotus or seated position is the most sacred, as this how meditation is practiced. In its highest intention, the term asana is used to define the “seat of stillness” in meditation.

The next step is pranayama. Although this is usually described as “breathing techniques,” it can more appropriately be defined as practices for “energy control.” It is through the breath and the mechanism of the lungs and heart that we can affect the prana or subtle life

¹ Purna Yoga is the Sanskrit term for Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga, which exists as a merging of the Self, or Spirit into the material or sensory domain as a practical manner of transmuting the life force energy.

force energy that rules all operations of the body and dictates the state of the mind. It is said that breath control is equal to self-control.

Pratyahara can be described as a feeling or state of deep inner relaxation. It has a neuromuscular effect on the body that shifts mental energy or prana away from the senses. It is the least understood of these specific yoga steps mentioned by Patanjali, and the most important. Without it, the body cannot properly rest and restore itself, and the mind will never experience its natural state of equanimity and peace.²

The complete system of yoga aims at improving our capacity to concentrate, known as *dharana*. Concentration is needed for the practice of meditation or *dhyana*. As the sixth step in the yoga sutras, concentration and focus are not something acquired later on the spiritual path, but developed as an integral part of the mind-body relationship.

Developing a higher quality of mind is an integral part of the complete lifestyle system of yoga and Ayurveda. This is overlooked today, as we continue trying to fix the body without giving much attention to what is going on in our minds. The example I often use is the Western idea of fitness where people stand or sit on machines, moving their bodies, while their minds are fixed on a TV screen, a magazine, or loud music. Meanwhile, an air-conditioning system pumps cold air into the room to control the amount of perspiration. The Western approach to wellness fragments the mind-body connection and does not recognize the importance of having the mind focused on what the body is doing and how it feels.

Dharana or focused attention is enhanced through proper asana, especially balancing postures, as well as pranayama and mantra. An Ayurvedic lifestyle fully enhances our power to hold attention and be more mindful. Walking meditation and T'ai Chi are practices in the Buddhist and martial arts traditions that are very good for establishing a focused mind. Patanjali explains in Yoga Sutra 3.4 that dharana (concentration) and dhyana (meditation) actually become united or *samyama*, along with *samadhi* or self-realization. The last three steps or sutras in the eight-limbed system become a single experience when one reaches a high level of mastery.

All these limbs are essential and should be completely interwoven in an integral yoga practice. They are not to be practiced one at a time until each one is mastered, as some confusedly believe. The contrast between lifestyle (yama & niyama) and enlightenment (samadhi) in these principles must be understood and taken in the proper perspective. Working with them takes time. Lifestyle represents a proactive approach to life, while meditation is a contemplative practice. One involves becoming fully responsible and establishing a sound mind-body connection, while samyama (concentration, meditation, and enlightenment) is established by separation from or negation of the body and shifting the mind into a witnessing mode.

The gradual shift in consciousness that occurs on the yogic path is like vision that transitions from the lens of our human eyes to glimpsing life through a large set of

² "The Forgotten Limb" in David Frawley's book titled *Yoga & Ayurveda*.

binoculars. We not only see but comprehend more. We feel more connected to all living things. Our perspective on life shifts and we begin to recognize the impermanence of life more clearly. Through yoga, our depth of vision becomes more based on feeling or intuition and less limited by the tangible. The term “seeing” or “seer” is synonymous with cultivating or having intuition, and its development requires a deeper understanding, through discrimination, of who we are, that is, Jnana Yoga.

I have found when practicing yoga as a fully integrated system that it creates a deeply unifying experience both internally and externally. The senses develop more acuity in their daily function, becoming more efficient externally, while internally our awareness enters the greater field of consciousness with less resistance from the mind. Yoga practiced with the intention of working towards an inner experience brings a cleansing effect to the senses, which are usually bombarded by the media, urban living, and attachments. In the current age, the media and capitalism continue to over-impress our minds at an ever-increasing pace. This creates an over-stimulated brain that attaches to the senses and outward functioning.

Nothing is more detrimental to our health than the inner denial of who we truly are. We are souls having a temporary human experience. Yoga can teach us to experience the inner side of the mind because, scientifically, it is aligned with the soul. Yoga is a guiding light back to our soul nature. However, when the yoga system is practiced in a fragmented manner, it provides only a limited capacity for psycho-spiritual transformation. The effects of a purely physical asana practice or fitness workout are immediate but short-lasting. The effects of an integral approach to yoga and wellness require more time and deeper study, but have an enduring therapeutic benefit.

For the most part, when we practice asanas, we usually experience immediate results in the muscles, and the overall bodily structure becomes more aligned. Through asana, the mind does get some release from its agitation and emotional swings. This is usually experienced as a physical sensation and does not penetrate as deeply as pranayama, mantra, and meditation, which are inner devices for attaining soul contact.

An integral approach to yoga begins with the physical and transcends to the level of the mind and its deeper dimensions. This energetic shift from the physical to the more subtle is clearly explained in the Bhagavad Gita as the two aspects of the mind known as *manas* (outer/lower) and *buddhi* (inner/higher). I will cover these two aspects of the mind further when discussing pratyahara or sensory control.

The advice I continually give to those new to yoga practice is to be “consistent and persistent,” and embrace patience along the way. It takes time to feel the profound benefits of the more subtle aspects of yoga like pranayama (breathing), pratyahara (inner relaxation), dharana (concentration), and dhyana (meditation). The effects of a consistent yoga practice are not measured by the capacities of your physical body, but through inner qualities of the mind. Are we more peaceful, adaptable, tolerant, and patient? Do we feel greater compassion for each other and nature’s kingdoms? Do we “feel” more attuned rather than “think” ourselves to be attuned? Do we experience sensitivities of the mind

and are we enjoying having greater discipline over our emotional moods? Such mental qualities begin to purify the nadis (channels of subtle energy) and then the central nervous system, creating greater balance and harmony systemically between our various physical operations.

Without a sense of dharma, our entire sadhana (spiritual practice) becomes much harder. Our dharma is not based on something tangible. Having dharma gives the sadhana a subtle shakti (energy) that propels us forward, regardless of the hurdles we face. At first, the practice of subtle yogic techniques can feel somewhat mechanical. Gradually, with continuity of effort, the very sweet feeling of peace begins to seep into our consciousness. We must remember, as we make our continued effort in sadhana, that peace, love, and contentment are within us. What we really seek, consciously or unconsciously, is the discovery that all we need lies within us. “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”³

The other form of yoga of which Hatha Yoga is part is Tantra. The term “Tantra” is synonymous with another Sanskrit word, *shastra* or book. It is a specific approach to reaching enlightenment that involves worship of Shiva and Shakti as the sun and moon or male and female energies. Most tantric practices involve awakening the kundalini (serpent) energy and rely on somewhat occult efforts for transcending the ego-mind.

To clarify: Tantra, as a powerful form of yoga, does not focus on sexual performance, but does include the importance of sexual symmetry and transmutation of the procreative force towards compassion, love, and emotional healing. Each chakra or subtle energy center can be correlated to various anatomical and physiological functions of the body. There are inner forms of tantric practices that include meditation, the use of mantras, particularly to the devi or goddess, and yantras, geometric figures meant to rearrange the landscape of our minds.

Several yogi saints in the recent renaissance of yoga both in India and America were worshipers of the Divine Goddess Kali, who is probably the most recognized of all Tantric symbols. The Goddess in Tantra is active and sublime, and becomes a power-filled vehicle for the transformation of our consciousness. All such practices purify the mind and subtle channels or nadis, and increase the vibration in the chakras so as to expand our awareness.

The outer forms of Tantra are the popular Hatha Yoga practices that have spread throughout the world. Tantra is considered by some teachers and lineages as a way to expand creativity and promote expression of prana, while Raja Yoga withdraws prana from the senses to enter into stillness. Many great yogis like Yogananda warned of the perils of excessive attention on the body through asana, because this engages the ego and creates attachment to our physical form. Equally many agree that asana serves an important role as a preparation for meditation, especially when practiced in an integral manner along with pranayama (breathing) and pratyahara (inner relaxation). Sadly, much of this integral approach to yoga has been lost in commercial yoga.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Hatha Yoga serves as a powerful physical, mental, and emotional preparation for higher meditation, and really has much more to do with uniting the energy and establishing the mind in a calm and centered space. The four branches of yoga follow the sutras and allow practitioners (*sadhaka*) a chance to develop themselves in the path that suits them most. We are drawn towards a path depending on our nature or constitution and the quality of our personality, as reflected mainly in the rising sign and moon sign. If we practice the path we are most drawn towards in this way, the other aspects will develop equally. For example, if a person is more drawn towards devotional practices (Bhakti Yoga) and focuses most of their energy on that path, to a certain degree that particular path will also increase their knowledge and desire to perform good actions (Karma Yoga) and even produce a predilection for meditation (Raja Yoga) and the study of scriptures (Jnana Yoga).

Each path is considered to develop the “whole” being equally, as explained in the Bhagavad Gita, India’s classic spiritual text. Therapeutically, an integral approach to yoga can also lower blood pressure, as it lowers the resting heart rate. This occurs as a result of holding inverted positions like headstand (*Sirsasana*) or shoulder stand (*Sarvangasana*) or very therapeutic positions like spinal twisting (*Ardha Matsyendrasana*) and floor postures, like the bow pose (*Urdhva Danurasana*). It takes more time to see the benefit of the subtler practices of pranayama, body locks (bandhas), mantras, and meditation. They slowly cleanse and purify the body’s subtle nerve channels within the deeper layers of the tissues and cells.

Practitioners must persevere in pranayama, mantra, and meditation to win the light of higher consciousness. As I have mentioned, Hatha Yoga primarily works on the physical body’s dhatus⁴ (tissues) of muscle, fat, and bone. However, specialized breathing techniques transcend the ego mind to heal us inwardly by awakening prana, the life force, as a type of inner medicine. When we awaken this dormant life-force energy, it removes the obstacles to internal health physically, mentally, and emotionally. We can then truly begin our quest for soul realization. Let’s remember the word yoga itself is derived from the root word *yug*, which means to unite or merge together. The term yoga also implies a system of transformation and transcendence. Practicing yoga in its true form is about wholeness and unity. It is the dissolution of the “I,” “me,” and “mine,” and creates an expanded understanding of life and its mysteries through selfless action and detachment from outcome (*vairagya*). Patanjali states that yoga develops human potentials internally through the settling and control of the mind’s thought fluctuations (*vrittis*).

In the modern field of neurobiology, the term neuroplasticity is used to describe the brain’s capacity for reprogramming itself when new neurons are created in response to experience. This means a person can change the manner in which they respond to experience, overcoming emotional conditioning. This seems to have great similarity to how Patanjali defines yoga as the ending of mental disturbances (*nirodha*).

⁴ According to Ayurvedic anatomy, there are seven supporting tissue layers that make up the entire body: *rasa* (plasma), *rakta* (blood), *mamsa* (muscle), *medas* (fat), *asthi* (bone), *majja* (nerves), and *shukra* (reproductive fluid). These tissues are the secondary sites where the doshas accumulate.

Yoga aims at clearing the mind through the management of prana and adherence to a vata-balancing lifestyle program. The more disturbed and stimulated a mind becomes, the more susceptible a person is to their emotional history. It is important to understand that the vast majority of humanity utilizes a very small portion of the brain. The main organ able to expand the power of the mind and consciousness becomes limited to just firing off emotional history stored in the amygdala.⁵ What I mean by small portion of the brain has to do with the aspect of mind that operates only on the sensory-emotional level. This is mainly the limbic area or mammalian brain, which works closely with the brain stem.⁶ This part of our brain evaluates experiences, so we can decide whether something is good or bad. It creates emotions that encourage us to act in accordance with the meaning we have assigned to whatever it is we are experiencing at that moment.

The expression of having “no brains” is equivalent to the level of consciousness we are currently living with. Most people’s minds function primarily on the sensory level. Because the mind-body relationship has fractured, we are dealing with a world living in emotional deficit. We search outside ourselves to balance our emotions, but can only do so superficially.

fMRI studies of monks and other meditators show they have the capacity to modulate the amygdala and related parts of the brain, like the insulae, which are believed to be involved in consciousness and play a role in diverse functions usually linked to emotion and regulation of bodily homeostasis or balance. It seems clear that the ancient yoga sutras can play a prominent role in healing the modern mind. What medical science will continue to do is validate the importance of a great wisdom we used to know and practice, but have obviously lost for some time.

According to yogic teaching the sensing mind or manas, which operates through the five senses, is the smallest aspect of the mind as a whole. As just explained, it relies predominantly on the limbic system, which is the basis of stored memories and experiences, and limited in its access to pure, untainted, unreactive consciousness. Integral yoga aims at awakening the higher dimensions of the mind, which allow us to be more attuned to the universal intelligence perceived through the intuitive function of our higher mind or buddhi.

The material world continues to advance in endless technological ways, such as gadgets and sense-attracting instruments. The spiritual world seeks to develop its own telepathic radio that far exceeds the capabilities of any instrument created by the intellect. The intention of yoga is to turn the energies of our senses inward. The essence of a real yoga practice lies in our capacity to redirect the five energies of the senses from their usual outward flow into the material world, inward to the realm of Spirit. The outer or physical world under the direction of maya⁷ has a very strong current that is delusive in nature and

⁵ Performs a primary role in the processing of memory, decision-making, and emotional reactions, which are part of the limbic system.

⁶ Consists of the medulla oblongata, pons, and midbrain, and continues downward to form the spinal cord.

⁷ A main concept of the Vedic teaching, associated with “illusion” as the relative existence of the world. Maya is nature in her dualistic aspect, ever in transitional flux.

gilds the lily, so to speak.⁸ The great yogis have suggested that the practice of yoga must become a way of life, as taught in Ayurveda, which consists of a collective array of healthy habits all working towards the same goal. Simple living is the secret strategy that great yogis have said can help us outwit the outward pull of the material world. Simple also means natural, staying connected to nature and her elements.

The eighth limb of the Ashtanga Yoga Sutras is samadhi, the highest state of consciousness. It was described by the Buddha as nirvana and by Jesus as the kingdom of heaven. In common English, we know it as enlightenment. Samadhi translates as the ultimate state of being. Call it whatever you like, attaining samadhi requires a clear understanding that the purpose of human existence is to know God. The longer I continue on this path, the greater my desire to experience the Divine mystery from within. When one is afire with such a desire, the search for its Source never ceases. We then realize that nothing in this world will ever fulfill us until our consciousness is one with this Source. Few are the blessed who have this rare opportunity, Krishna said, “Out of one thousand, one seeks me; and out of one thousand that seek me, one knows me.”

All humanity is seeking the one experience that will transcend their consciousness to a state of joy and everlasting bliss, but only a few are truly aware of making a conscious effort to reach this state. The quest for happiness in yoga can be expressed through the chanting of various mantras and soulful songs, by practicing meditation, and serving others. In our daily activities, we must maintain the consciousness that we are divine beings first and foremost. Once the commitment to yoga has been made with strong determination, which includes concentration and continuity of practice, the yogi or sadhaka (practitioner) will arrive gradually at the highest place.

There are so many variables to be considered in reaching this blissful consciousness. Most important is to consider one aspect of our sadhana at a time, and then mold the different aspects together into one practice, one life. Yoga is so broad in scope that trying to learn everything at one time is not possible. Trying to apply all these ancient principles to our modern understanding of life may not be very easy, practical, or even necessary. But I have learned that as I continue on the path, what is next for me on the journey appears in my consciousness and daily activities. Such realizations usually come during moments of daily introspection and meditation. As an observer, I am able to view myself and my actions from an objective, discriminating perspective, and intuitive guidance then becomes clear and concise. We are often misguided when the mind is dependent on the senses, but divinely lighted when we can discern or distinguish between the ego and soul.

Our state of happiness is often determined by how much pleasure we are able to give the physical body and its commanders, the senses. Another reason for the popularity of asana fitness yoga is that learning the more subtle limbs, four through seven, breathing, relaxation, concentration, and meditation, requires substantially more time and personal practice. Unlike the physical postures, which give quite immediate results, it takes more time to feel the actual transformational benefit of limbs four through seven, which, being

⁸ Having a pleasing or showy appearance that conceals something of little worth can also be a synonym for maya, the delusory energy present in creation.

subtle, address the more profound spiritual aspects of the energy body. How can we be receptive to the subtle aspects of yoga when the majority of our life is involved with bathing the senses and the body? The senses are a necessary part of living and learning, but, if used improperly, they can strangle our capacity for transformation and create bad habits and mental ruts.

American culture operates from the idea of individuality and opportunity, which gives birth to capitalism, something very far from being democratic, because it feeds the hunger for greed. Yoga is a system of sustaining wellness in anyone regardless of who they are or their income. When we improve ourselves, we do our part in changing the world around us. Personal transformation enhances the vibration in our soul so that we can attract abundance and have success in whatever we choose. When we look at yoga as a business venture, we ignore the selfless intentions it was founded upon. The devotional essence that has sustained these traditions for millennia becomes veiled behind gestures like “namaste” and a good hug. Perhaps the Hollywood expression “fake it ’til you make it” may actually influence those involved in yoga to find the meaning of devotion within themselves.

In summary, the eight limbs of yoga can be divided into three parts: **lifestyle** (yama and niyama), **practice** (limbs three through seven) and **Being** in bliss consciousness (limb eight, samadhi). Lifestyle is the principle of *Sat*, a life in pursuit of truth. *Chit* includes the practices we perform that can enlighten and expand our vision and understanding of truth. *Ananda* is the principle of love and bliss consciousness sourced from the soul. As we can see, there is much to understanding yoga, its history, practice, and connection to a lifestyle system like Ayurveda.