

Hamlet's Vinyasa: To Flow or Not to Flow
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Vinyasa yoga is all the rage, and why not? Linking yoga-asanas together in a flowing manner stimulates and invigorates our physiology, while a refinement of the practice brings mental focus and clarity. The term "vinyasa," once translated for me by lovely Dr. Brahmamari, a 70 year old Sanskrit scholar in Mysore, India teaching the Bhagavad Gita, described it as a "moving-breathing system." One of the most well-known of the vinyasa sequences is *Ashtanga Vinyasa*, which I studied with Pattabhi Jois in Mysore in '94. This style of yoga, named by Jois' guru, Krishnamacharya of Madras, carries within its name two important aspects: *ashtanga*, or "eight limbs," otherwise known as the classical yoga system of Patanjali, and *vinyasa*, a "joining or linking mechanism." A vinyasa is "the element that sews together the various movements in a sequence of changes,"¹ and in yoga is a conscious, intentional process. Ideally, this flow sequence helps us perceive moment by moment changes occurring within us, and to make the leap from awareness of one's individual, separate self to the flow of energy exchange that makes up the world we live in, connecting us to everything else.

Taking *vinyasa* to this level creates a dramatic shift in consciousness, but is probably not why most people take up the practice. Indeed, how often do people practice with the true intention of self-realization or "enlightenment?" And if the intention of the practice is more mundane, are there any drawbacks to practicing yoga in this fashion?

One thing I've learned in 22 years of yoga practice: staying still is difficult for me, while moving has always felt very freeing. I would propose that, in general, staying **consiously** still—which has a corresponding term in Sanskrit, *shtiti*, or steady—is one of the most challenging practices for most Americans, as we are a very *rajasic*, or movement-oriented, society. In fact, we are dangerously out of balance in terms of constant movement (body or mind or both). So it's no surprise that yoga practitioners have been drawn in droves to the flow-based yoga styles, myself included. Not only has vinyasa felt physically wonderful and filled an artistic void for me, and other yogis who came from the dance tradition, but constant asana-flow allowed me the opportunity to **not** be as present in my practice as staying still in the poses. What a relief! A chance to move my body but not really be present...this had been my coping mechanism since the age of three, and here I could do it in yoga too!

But as we know, yoga is about bringing consciousness into everything thing we do, feel and think. Using vinyasa, which also refers to any step-by-step process, to escape from my habitual thought patterns by expending so much attention on the action of moving and breathing smoothly, meant that I could never seriously confront the repercussions of those *vasanas*, or individual thought patterns. I used vinyasa yoga, unconsciously, to not only avoid looking at uncomfortable aspects of my personality, but to reinforce certain tendencies, such as competitiveness in the asanas (ego-enhancement). I have also observed that not holding a pose, and not going deeply into the sensory experience of the soma, kept the practice just that: on the surface, superficial. How could I get to know the deeper action within a pose, the hidden language of the asana, as Swami Radha would say, if I was scurrying out of it all the time?

I was lucky in the early years. I began learning Iyengar yoga in the 80's, as well as the yogic lifestyle practices taught in the Sivananda tradition, and we all know how long those Iyengar teachers make you hold those poses! Learning from BKS Iyengar himself in Pune, as well as his son Prashant and daughter Geeta, was a revelation. I believed Iyengar when he said that a Hatha yogi could only transform herself at the deepest level by diving fully into the experience and mystery held within an asana, working at the level of the mind and spirit, not just the body. I learned that asana means "seat," so any pose where I was, *at the same time*, both witnessing and deeply connected to a felt-sense and inner action, became the potential means for deep purification and inner transformation.

But a part of me didn't really want to "go there" back then, didn't really want to confront my inner demons or angels, so I moved on to exploring *Ashtanga Vinyasa* and creating my own vinyasas instead.

Ashtanga Vinyasa taught me something altogether different. Because I found it to be a difficult practice both mentally and physically (coping with the boredom of a repetitive practice coupled with upper body weakness), I gained a lot by staying with it for a number of years. I learned to deepen and follow my breath and use it as a compass to listen to my body, as well as a method of "transcending" my body. But I didn't like the emphasis on the attainment of a poses with little regard for the inner integrity of the pose; even though good Ashtanga instructors like Richard Freeman were imbibing the practice with integrity, there were many who, in my opinion, were not.

And then came Viniyoga, the yoga of Krishnamacaya's son, Desikachar. I loved training with his long-time student and master teacher, Gary Kraftsow, and utilizing sensible, simplified vinyasa to prepare the body for longer holdings. The depth of teaching in this tradition is hard to match, especially therapeutically, philosophically, and in terms of pranayama, yet I found I longed for the stronger asana experience of my past. So I combined everything I had been taught, which was very nourishing on the one hand, but could be a real Catch 22 on the other. Having so much knowledge and capacity, I could hide away from myself even more if I wanted to! Hey, there are so many ways to approach this yoga stuff, I can distract myself endlessly thinking up new sequences, linking different pranayamas and visualizations, while chanting a sutra or mantra to boot! It was heaven...for awhile...but I became aware how easy it was to fall into vinyasa practice only, and to avoid holding the poses for longer periods of time (3-10 minutes). My soul reminded me that I sought a deeper experience of Self.

Thus began my re-commitment to what I term "Iyengar-inspired yoga," incorporating supported poses within practice to allow for longer holdings, and adding more restoratives. Keeping mental notes to track how balanced my practices were, I came up with a system to insure I covered at least four of Patanjali's limbs: asana, pranayama, pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses through savasana and yoga nidra) and dharana/dhyana. Offering these practices to my students in class is more challenging, as time restrictions always restrict what we can do, but in an ideal world, they would all contain these practices.

To sum up, discovering how the personality indeed keeps us from experiencing our own inner divinity, through distraction, negative self-talk, doubt and lack of discipline, is an important step in the *vinyasa* of one's journey in yoga. If we can utilize the gifts of vinyasa to take us deeper rather than keeping us constantly moving, then the practice can be deemed "right action." If not, perhaps its time to find another approach. Finding the inspiration to re-commit ourselves to a conscious practice is always necessary, and is a **process**. There are many teachings and teachers to explore, if you find yourself in a rut. Or the time may be here to dive deeply within, acquainting yourself with the inner guru, that inside you which will lead you from darkness to light, from identification with not-knowing to the experience of knowing the expansive freedom of the true Self.

1. Jivamukti Yoga: Practices for liberating body and soul, Sharon Gannon and David Life, Ballantine, 2002.