

## An Essay on Alignment by John Schumacher

Alignment is a cornerstone of the practice of Iyengar Yoga. One often thinks of alignment in terms of the positioning of the body and its various parts during the practice of *asana* (posture). The value of this aspect of alignment in balancing and protecting the joints muscles, organs, vessels, and tissues of the body is well known to even beginning practitioners of Iyengar Yoga. What may be less well known is the importance of alignment with respect to the flow of energy in the body.

According to adept yoga masters past and present, all of us are constructed a bit like an onion, layer upon layer called *koshas* (literally “sheaths” or “bodies”). The outer layer, or physical layer, makes up our material body and is the most concrete, familiar, and accessible.

The next layer, called the *pranamayakosha*, is the energy layer. It is concerned with *prana*. *Prana* is the life force which permeates the universe at all levels as physical, mental, intellectual, sexual, spiritual, and cosmic energy. It manifest in us as vigor, power, vitality, life, and spirit.

Although the physical layer and energy layer can be described and experienced differently, they are inseparable, contiguous, and interconnected. What happens in one is directly related to, affected by, and affects what happens in the other. This is where the importance of alignment comes into play on another level. Just as water takes the shape of the vessel through which it flows, so, too, does energy. Where there are blockages, the flow is impeded; where the paths are open, the flow is free. Properly aligning the body, therefore, permits the optimal flow of energy in the body.

This connection between the alignment of our body and our energy level becomes much more apparent in the practice of *pranayama*, or yogic breathing. Breath is the vehicle through which the yogi directly accesses *prana*, the life force. If you observe carefully, when you slump as you stand and sit, you will feel heavy and tire easily. Your breathing will be restricted and your energy blocked and diminished. Stand or sit upright with an open chest and relaxed diaphragm, and your breath will flow more freely, and you will experience much more vitality. By aligning the body to create physical balance and increased internal space, you can quiet and deepen your breath, reduce the amount of energy you use, and have more energy at your disposal. Everybody wants more energy. Alignment is the key.

There is yet another level in which Iyengar Yoga awakens us to the link between alignment and energy. In the Upanishads, which contain revelations of the deepest meditations of the early sages, we are told that not only do the trees, mountains, and rivers, the wind, and the stars surround us, but that they are to be found within us as well. Indeed, our bodies are microcosms of the vast and infinite macrocosm. We contain within our bodies the very essence of Nature – and the very essence of the Divine. By directing our attention inward, toward the muscles and bones, the organs and breath, by moving from the outer layers toward the inner layers, we can become aware of the subtle

flow of cosmic energy that envelops and moves through us. We are literally afloat in a vast sea of energy, and by learning how to align ourselves with the flow of all these currents, we can develop the talent to navigate in this sea as surely as a skilled sailor can learn to steer his ship through tricky tides.

As usual, B.K.S. Iyengar says it best when he writes in his wonderful book, *Light On Life*: “We live within our individual consciousness with its limited intelligence, often feeling lonely and puny, when there is a conduit available directly to consciousness and intelligence. Through this conduit flows *prana*, joining each individual among us to the highest original principle of Nature. *Pranayama* is about restoring this conduit so that the intelligence bearing the energy of the macrocosm can illuminate our microcosm.”

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