

At this meeting we learned about the 3 Gunas, the Qualities of Nature, which affect us all.

Yoga teaches us that everything in the universe arises from the fundamental substance called Prakriti. From Prakriti the 3 primary Gunas (or qualities) emerge, creating the essential aspects of all nature. All 3 Gunas are always present in all beings and objects surrounding us but vary in their relative amounts. The Gunas cannot be separated or removed, but can be acted upon to encourage their increase or decrease. Humans have the unique ability to consciously alter the levels of the Gunas in order to maintain a balance. Our lifestyle, our thoughts and the energy around us all affect that balance.

The 3 primary Gunas are:

Tamas. This is inactivity or the impulse to stay the same. It is a state of dullness, inertia and negativity. It manifests from ignorance and deludes all beings from their spiritual truths. In the western world we might call this depression but it is a normal reaction to life events that we find difficult to cope with. To reduce Tamas avoid over sleeping, over eating, inactivity, passivity, fearful situations and food that is heavy, dense, stale, chemically treated, processed or refined.

Rajas. This is over activity or the impulse to move. It is a state of agitation, change and worry. It manifests from desire and attachment and prevents us from rest. In the western world we might call this anxiety but it is a normal reaction to perceived threats or concerns. To reduce Rajas avoid over exercising, over work, loud music, excessive thinking or consumption of material goods and Rajasic foods such as fried or spicy foods, and stimulants.

Sattva. This is balance or the impulse to evolve. It is a state of harmony, joy, intelligence and peace. It is a normal reaction to the love and beauty that surrounds us. Sattva reduces Rajas and Tamas and thus makes liberation from them possible. To increase Sattva favour activities and environments which create joy and positive thoughts and eat foods such as whole grains, legumes, fresh fruits and vegetables. Yoga was developed to create Sattva in the mind and body, thus, practising yoga strongly cultivates a calm, confident and pleasant state.

The mind's psychological qualities are highly unstable and can quickly fluctuate between the different Gunas. The predominating Guna acts as a lens that affects our perceptions and perspective of the world around us. Thus, if the mind is in Tamas it may experience world events as aggressive, frightening and uncaring and will react in a Tamasic way. If the mind is in Rajas it may experience world events as chaotic, confusing and demanding and it will react in a Rajasic way. With the practice of yoga the power of Tamas and Rajas are reduced and Sattva is increased and made stronger. The body, mind and emotions are more likely to remain balanced.

A type of yoga called Swara Yoga gives us an easy and direct means of balancing the Gunas using our breathing. When we breathe predominately through the left nostril Tamas tends to increase and when we breathe predominately through the right nostril Rajas tends to increase. By balancing the flow of breath in our nostrils we can balance the Gunas.

I have given you three separate practises:

The **daily practice** includes some breathing techniques from Swara yoga and is designed to increase Sattva. Best results will come if you persevere and do these every day.

The other two practises can be used to reduce either Tamas or Rajas.

The **ascending** or lifting practice will help to reduce Tamas.

The **descending** or calming practice will help to reduce Rajas.

However the most important thing is to notice the effect that each activity within the practice has on YOU because YOU are the expert in yourself. Any of the activities can be rejected if they do not work for you. Any of the activities can be done in isolation if you find them useful.

The aim of your yoga practice is to make you feel better. Please be sensitive to your limitations and do not dominate your body or be harsh with it. Be gentle with your self and forgive your body for hurting or failing you.

I do hope yoga can be of help to you. I trained as a teacher in 1984 with the Friends of Yoga Society (FRYOG) and on their behalf I carry out home visits to individuals or groups in order to develop a more personal practice. There is a modest fee for these visits. For more information please ring me on 023 8040 6893 (afternoons are best)

If you would like to go to a yoga teacher in Southampton I recommend Fiona Ashdown, a very experienced and gentle teacher who lives in Arthur Road, Shirley 023 8063 2881.

Daily practice to increase Sattva

• 3 stage breathing

This can be done lying down or sitting upright in a chair or on the floor. You put your hands on your body in different places in order to feel the movement. Please stay within easy comfortable limits for your body. Do not become tense or rigid. Relax the whole body especially the shoulders, neck and face. Aim to have the inhalation and exhalation of equal length, but do not try too hard, just breathe as naturally and deeply as you are able. Do not judge or criticise your breath.

Stage 1: place your palms on your lower abdomen and breathe in and out deeply. As you inhale, feel your body expand outwards and fill your hands. As you exhale, gently contract the abdominal muscles and feel your hands move back toward your spine. Take 3 breaths in and out.

Stage 2: place your palms on your lower ribs – the ones that are not joined together at the front. As before, feel your body expand outwards as you inhale and then subside again as you exhale. Take 3 breaths in and out.

Stage 3: place your palms on your chest with the fingers touching the collarbones. Again breathe in and out feeling the body move under your hands. Take 3 breaths in and out.

Repeat all 3 stages twice more.

Now rest your hands somewhere comfortable and observe the natural flow of breath in and out for a few minutes. Feel yourself receiving the in breath and letting the out breath go. Filling and emptying.

• Alternate Nostril breathing

Sit comfortably upright in a chair, or on the floor. Rest your hands on your thighs with the palms up and the fingers facing forward. Bring the tips of the first fingers and the thumbs into light contact. This is a yoga posture called Chin Mudra. It helps conserve energy and connects us to the higher aspects of ourselves. Sit like this for a while before beginning the Alternate Nostril breath. If you feel anxiety rising up then turn the palms down (Jnana Mudra) but keep the finger/thumb contact.

When you are ready to start move your dominant hand up in front of your nose folding the three middle fingers into the palm leaving the thumb available to close one nostril and the little finger available to close the other.

Prepare by inhaling through both nostrils then exhaling through both nostrils. Then begin the first round: **Close right nostril. Inhale through left nostril. Close left nostril, open right nostril. Exhale through right nostril. Inhale through right nostril. Close right nostril, open left nostril. Exhale through left nostril. Inhale through the left nostril to begin the second round.**

Perform at least 5 rounds. Finish by breathing out through the left nostril. Rest your hand back on your thigh in Chin or Jnana Mudra and observe the natural flow of breath for a while.

• Positive chanting with arm movements

Sit nice and upright in your chair. Feel your feet solidly on the earth. Place your palms together.

This is the chant: **Om shanti shanti shanti, abhaya akrodha mantra shakti om**

There is one hand position for each sound. Inhale deeply to begin:

Om - with palms together in front of you. (the sound of the universe, om as in home with a silent h)

shanti - with the palms together in front of the forehead (peace to my head, long a – shaanti)

shanti - with the palms together in front of the heartspace (peace to my heart, long a – shaanti)

shanti - with the palms together in front of the belly (peace to my body, long a – shaanti)

Inhale again here

abhaya – with the palms turned upward (freedom from fear, haya as in the greeting hi ya)

akrodha – with the fingertips lightly touching (freedom from anger, rod like road and the h is silent)

mantra – with the palms together in front of the throat (sound vibration)

shakti Om – with the palms together high over your head (shakti is transforming energy)

Inhale deeply as you lower the arms out to the sides and bring the palms back together in front of you again. Do this at least 3 times but more if you can.

If these Sanskrit words don't suit you then use the English version given in the "Ascending practice".

• Appreciating yourself

Sit upright with the palm of your right hand on the upper chest and the back of the left hand on the upper back. Feel your body breathing between the two hands. (If this position is not comfortable for you then place the left palm on the upper chest with the right hand over it)

Appreciate the wonder of this life, maintained by the simple ebb and flow of the breath. Have compassion for your body and forgive it for hurting. Have the courage to accept yourself as you are, and be happy.

Try to practice a relaxation at least once day, either following the above or at another time.

Relaxations

These are best done lying down on your back on a folded blanket. If you have lower back problems then put cushions under your knees to support them and help keep the lower back on the floor. If your head tips back and the chin faces upwards then use a pillow to bring the chin down to a more neutral position. Make sure you won't be disturbed and put a blanket over you if you think you might get cold. Let the body settle and become still before you begin. When you have finished the relaxation have a good stretch and a yawn before you get up again.

• Yoga Nidra

This practice involves "visiting" all the parts of your body with your internal attention in order to experience it as something that is whole, complete, balanced and vibrant.

You move your attention from one part of the body to another in turn. Go at an even pace and don't linger - visit each part for just a couple of seconds. Learn the sequence and go round as many times as you find useful. If you have a willing friend then ask them to read out the parts of the body whilst you listen. This practice is refreshing during the day but may be especially useful as you go to sleep.

The right side:

Right hand, wrist, lower arm, elbow, upper arm, shoulder, armpit, right side of chest, right side of waist, right hip, thigh, knee, calf, shin, heel, ankle, foot.

The left side:

Left hand, wrist, lower arm, elbow, upper arm, shoulder, armpit, left side of chest, left side of waist, left hip, thigh, knee, calf, shin, heel, ankle, foot.

The back of the body:

Right buttock, left buttock, lower back, middle of back, upper back, right shoulder blade, left shoulder blade, the whole of the spine from the base to the top, the whole of the back. Back of the neck, back of the head, crown of the head.

The front of the body:

Right side of the forehead, left side of the forehead, the whole forehead. Right eye, left eye, right ear, left ear, right nostril, left nostril, upper lip, lower lip, chin, throat, right collar bone, left collar bone, right side of chest, left side of chest, the whole chest, upper abdomen, navel, lower abdomen, the whole abdomen.

The whole body:

The whole of the right leg and foot, the whole of the left leg and foot. Both legs together.

The whole of the right arm and hand, the whole of the left arm and hand. Both arms together.

The whole front of the body, the whole back of the body, the front and back together. The whole head.

Both legs, both arms, the front and back of the body and the head.

The whole body, the whole body, the whole body. Resting quietly and peacefully.

• Drawing your outline

The effect of this practice is similar to the above. I have included it because everyone is different and some people find this easier to remember and simpler to do.

Imagine you are laying on a very large piece of paper, bigger than your body. You have a small pencil that you can move around using the power of your mind. The tip of the pencil is resting on the paper at the crown of your head and you are going to move it around your body to create an outline. Imagine the pencil beginning to move down the side of the head, the neck and then the shoulder, following the outline of your body closely. Continue to follow your outline all the way round the body until you are back at the crown of the head. Now reverse the direction and go round the other way.

Ascending practice to reduce Tamas

• Foot movements

Sit on a firm chair with your feet hip width apart. Lift both heels then replace them. Keep the heels down and lift the feet and replace them. Repeat twice more. Pivoting on the heels, turn both feet to the right then the left and repeat twice more. Spread the toes wide, then curl them under. Repeat twice more. You could do these movements with your hands instead or with your hands and feet moving together simultaneously.

• Positive chanting with shoulder rotations

Sit nice and upright in your chair. Feel your feet solidly on the earth. Rest your fingertips on the tops of your shoulders. To make the rotations bring your elbows together in front of you then separate them and lift them up toward the ceiling then take them back and down to your sides again. Continue as you chant, making one rotation for each line of the song.

**I sing this song to set me free,
from fear and anger that bother me.**

Repeat for as long as you like then put your hands in prayer position and say Peace, Peace, Peace.

- **Align to the universe**

Stand up as straight as you can and look forward. Let your arms hang by your sides with the palms facing forward. As you breathe in raise your arms out to the side and then up above your head bringing the palms together. As you breathe out bring the hands back down the front of the body, keeping the palms together until you have to separate them to take your arms back to your sides. Do this 3 times.

- **Twisting**

Stand with your feet about shoulder width apart. Swing your arms gently from side to side letting the body turn with the arms. Set up a nice rhythm then, as the arms go to the right let the left heel lift and the knee bend and as your arms go to the left let the right heel lift and the knee bend. Continue for as long as you wish then slow the movement down and let it stop gradually until you are still again.

- **Face stretch**

Sit nice and upright with your palms resting on your thighs. Lean slightly forwards as you stretch your eyes wide, look up and stick out your tongue as far as it will go. Release the face as you lean slightly back and smile. Do this 3 times.

Now observe how you feel and then go about your life or repeat the practice once more, or try the next practice or add a relaxation.

Descending practice to reduce Rajas

- **Move and stretch**

Stand with your feet about shoulder width apart. Raise your arms to vertical with the palms facing towards each other and the shoulders relaxed down. As you breathe out turn your right foot out to the side, lower your right arm and lean over to the right taking the left arm over your head. Breathe in to return to upright with the arms vertical and the foot facing forward again. Breathe out as you repeat to the left. Do this three times to each side.

- **Open and close**

Now bring the feet a little closer together and stand naturally. Let your arms hang with the palms facing forward. As you breath in arch the back, open the chest, look up and gently stretch the elbows back towards each other. As you breathe out return the body to upright, firm the abdomen, bend the knees and bring the arms forward with the palms facing each other and look down. Repeat this twice more.

- **Let go with the sound of Om** (pronounce Om as in home with a silent h)

Sit toward the front edge of a firm chair with your feet wide apart. Rest your palms on your knees. Breathe in and stretch the body up tall. Breathe out deeply as you lean forward taking the body and head toward the floor between your feet. Inhale to come back to upright. Now repeat again this time chanting OM as you breathe out and lean forwards. Do this 3 times. Sit upright and observe.

- **Shoulder releases**

Sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Make soft fists by placing the thumbs into the palms and curling the fingers softly over them. Inhale to lift both shoulders up to your ears. Pause. Exhale to drop your shoulders quickly. Pause. Do this twice more.

- **Finger meditation**

Sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Place your palms together in front of you making good contact between the backs of all the fingers. As you breathe in move the two little fingers apart from each other and as you breathe out bring them back together. Repeat with the next two fingers and then the middle fingers, first fingers and thumbs. Now work your way back to the little fingers. Repeat once or twice more as you wish.

Now observe how you feel and either go about your life or add a relaxation.

The world and everything in it constantly moves between the three states of Tamas, Rajas and Sattva. We can hope to recognise that this movement is only on the surface and that somewhere, deep within ourselves there is a place of peace and understanding.

**When you fly, may you fly, like a bird, joyfully
and when you fall, may you fall, like a leaf, gracefully, without regret.**