

Hatha yoga is the observance of mental and emotional conditioning within each individual in the practice of Asana and Pranayama, a form of meditation in action. It is an attempt to reconcile the inner tensions. Alan Goode took a week to explore his practice in the silence and beauty of the Snowy Mountains.

From the Hatha Yoga Pradipika

1:12 He who practices hatha Yoga should live alone in a small Matha (monastery) situated in a place free of rocks, water and fire to the extent of a bows length and in a well ruled kingdom, which is prosperous and free of disturbance.

1:13 the Matha should have a small door, and should be without any windows; it should be level and without any holes; it should be neither too high, too low nor too long. It should be very clean, being well smeared with cow dung and free from all insects. Outside, it should be attractive with a small hall (mandapa), a raised seat and a well, and be surrounded by a wall. These are the characteristics of a Yoga Matha as laid down by the Siddhas who have practiced Hatha Yoga .

1:14 Living in such a monastery the Yogin being free in mind of all cares, should practice only Yoga all the time in the way taught by his Guru.

I came over the last rise to see a small hut tucked up under a few Willow trees on lush river flat at the end of a dirt road with the Kosciusko National Park on three sides. No roads, no electricity, no radio. I had found my Matha. I crossed the swaying suspension bridge by foot over the fast flowing mountain stream carrying a box of food and enough questions to last me the week I intended to stay. For some time I had been looking for a place to practice away from the pressures and distractions of the world; to practice undisturbed.

So often we practice at the beginning or end of a busy day with minds full or fatigued and rarely do we have time to make practice the focal point of our daily routine, or as a teacher practice is often responding to questions which arise in teaching. It is both a luxury and a privilege to practice unencumbered.

Because it was mid winter the sun set quickly and night descended as I lit the stove and struggled to plug the all too many holes through which the wind whistled. Dinner by kerosene lamp, an hours sitting and then to bed. After a solid night sleep dawn came which saw an arm rise from my sleeping bag to test the temperature and quickly retreat. After struggling with myself for 2 hours I rose at 8 am to a thick covering of frost which looked like snow covering the ground, trees and buildings. After some fumbling with the matches I'd lit the fire and got down to practice.

I quickly established a daily routine. Morning Pranayama followed by Asanas then breakfast/lunch at about 11.30am. Reading and notes then a few domestic jobs followed by Pranayama, afternoon Asana practice, dinner, sitting and bed. In all about 6 - 7 hours practice per day. Having done yoga for many years I was familiar with the development of practice but in this quiet environment I was most interested to observe my mood swings or reactions to such an intense schedule. I found as the days progressed that I had days of great interest followed by days that I avoided getting started - procrastinating. The level of energy relating directly to the amount of interest I had that day; a play of mind more than body.



Bridge to the hut

During the retreat I made a point of not going far from the hut so that I had maximum time for reflection and reading while conserving my energy for practice. Each morning I would take two buckets the 50 metres or so to

the river to fill for my cooking and cleaning. I would go early in the day when the birds and kangaroos were still out on the river flat enjoying the freshness and clarity of the day.

I had divided the Asana practices with mornings consisting of active poses and the afternoons Headstand, Shoulderstand and forward bends. Being quite cold even in the middle of the day I took to doing jumpings followed by backbends or balancings - poses which kept the blood circulating and the body temperature up but even then gloves, socks and hat were quickly returned once I finished. The afternoons saw me covered in blankets as I worked my way through the forward bend variations. The hut I was in had been constructed by trout fishermen with the limited materials available and so apart from the inability to retain much warmth, the wood heater belched smoke, which, after a few makeshift repairs was kept to a minimum but the result was that although I didn't have a cold, my nose would block whenever I did inverted poses and clear when I came down. No mention of that in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika.



The hut on a frosty morning

Practice requires discipline but not of the type one might first think. To most the word discipline evokes images of stern, upright people and we look to the day we will practice without effort, with ease. In reality this is far from true - the challenge of practice is not to do it for perfection, but to do it at all. Some days we practice with ease enjoying the time set aside while on others it seems to cut into other activities; we have to stop what we are doing to do this chore. In the beginning we practice when interested (by inclination), but in time practice is done regardless of mood because of the benefits derived. By practicing in all moods we learn more about ourselves - fears, likes and dislikes. To go on practicing each of us must

acknowledge our difficulties and resolve the issues within.

As stated in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika

1: 64 Any person who is not lethargic can obtain yoga, be he young, old, very old, sick or weak.

1: 65 One who is intent on practice will obtain yoga, not one who is idle.

1: 66 Yoga is not obtained by reading scriptures, nor by wearing the dress of a yogini, nor by talking about it. Practice alone is the course of success.

Hatha Yoga is often referred to as the science of will which implies a system of effort. However, when willpower is turned on the physical presentation of the asanas they become hard, congested and contractive. Asanas should not be practiced from willpower but from concentration. Willpower is required to go on concentrating, looking, inquiring because our natural inclination is to familiarise and standardise everything. For any serious Sadhaka (student) the practice deals with the channeling of energy, the focusing of attention upon the task to remove the obstacles to practice which are mostly within ourselves. Each of us has a determined amount of energy and that quantity is all the energy we have. The yogic process is to focus the agitated, dispersed mind to make a maximum amount of energy available to us for the perception of our inner world. Yoga in this context is learning a system of release - "Can I do yesterday's pose in a more refined way, expending less energy?". A peeling away of effort.

As the days unfolded my practice was not dealing with how much I could do or how capable I was but became a study in the ability to surrender to practice, observing the reactions of the mind - my relationship to what I was doing. The intensity of being alone in such a setting was at times very confronting. I experienced periods where my mind seemed rigid or unresponsive (stubborn). Although physically I felt fine all thought processes seemed amplified - indecisive and rebellious, at times whimsical in its attachment to other objects. This quality was most observable in pranayama where I would find myself wandering or sleepy and was very difficult to alter. In asana practice however my mind became engaged in the doing which made it somewhat easier. At other times I felt a

stillness and clarity of mind unattainable in daily life. My mind would sit quietly without jumping from thought to thought. The experience of peace within myself and with the outer environment was exquisite.

Some readers may see this trip as a form of penance but in reality it is part of an unfolding process that each of us must undertake; the maturing of practice. As beginners we are fed points and techniques - how to approach the Asana physically, its shape and form. As our practice progresses we are taught by the teacher to question the pose psychologically and emotionally, its inner form. If we continue to practise delving deeper into the spirit, we must come to a point of maturity which makes the practice our own. No longer just doing yoga through or for the teacher but allowing yoga to become a part of us. To become humble before it.

It is impossible to succeed in the performance of asanas or to conquer them. Yoga then becomes the breaking down of conditioning and habits through observation and experience.