

The Hidden Importance of Linking

March 13, 2009

Siegfried Bleher, PhD

In the Iyengar method we are taught, as teachers and student alike, about the importance of linking in *asana* practice. We learn to link movements into 'paired actions', we link actions in one part of the body to actions in other parts of the body, and we link a sequence of poses by selecting them according to their effects on the mind and body, and by performing actions that are common among the poses. Through this kind of practice we come to appreciate the subtlety of the *asanas*, the subtlety of our bodies, and the potential of our minds to apprehend those subtleties. The purpose or function and effects of each *asana* and how they relate to each other reveal themselves to us through the directed practice of linking. In this article we look at five specific reasons and benefits of linking, all of them founded in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, and one of them in a way hidden.

Consider the practice of *Utthita Trikonasana*. In the first steps of performing this *asana*, we are told to press the inner edge of the front foot down and turn the whole leg out. These two individual movements engaged together are a 'paired action'. If we only press the inner foot down, which we can easily do, then we may feel some stability in the foot, but we may collapse the arch and turn the thigh in at the same time. Turning the thigh in of the front leg in *Utthita Trikonasana* will strain both the knee and hip joint. If, on the other hand, we only turn the whole leg out, we obtain a better result in the outer hip joint of the same leg than if we only press the inner foot down, but there are other consequences. We may find the inner edge of the foot lifting or getting light compared with the outer edge of the foot. And this lightness will strain the knee, and prevent the inner thigh from lengthening, so the inner surface of the hip joint doesn't receive a stable support by comparison with the outer surface of hip joint. What appear to be simple movements that are relatively easy to perform each have localized benefits, but also potentially undesirable consequences somewhere else in the body. When we perform both of these actions together, then we can eliminate the undesirable consequences, and enjoy more global benefits.

Notice, however, that performing this kind of paired action is usually more difficult than performing each movement by itself, both from a physical point of view and from a cognitive point of view. The physical difficulty arises because the medium through which globally separate parts of the body have to pair or interact and link is often stiff or short or tight, and presents a resistance: the hamstrings are often tight, and must lengthen when we both press the inner edge of the foot down and turn the whole leg out. And there is a supportive or complementary action that must also be learned and performed, which is pressing the inner edge of the foot down and lifting the outer thigh to the hip of the front leg.

The cognitive difficulty arises because the paired action is usually new to our minds and requires that on some level we overcome the duality (*dvandva*, [YS II.48](#)) inherent in performing the two movements separately. For example, as beginners, we alternate between pressing the inner edge of the foot down and turning the whole leg out. We go on alternating until the moment (*ksana*, [YS III.9](#)) when we suddenly notice we are doing them both together. At that point we 'own' the paired action and add

intention and effort into deepening it. And at that moment we also notice that what were two separate and localized movements performed with oscillation (*vrtti*, [YS I.2](#)) are now a single global action, performed in a more steady way. The whole leg has become steady (*sthira*, [YS II.46](#)). The oscillation of the mind specific to the two separate movements has become stilled (*nirodha*, [YS I.2](#)), and a kind of joy (*sukha*, [YS II.46](#)) may arise from that stillness. That moment of joy may be simply satisfaction with attaining a new stage in our practice (overcoming the obstacle of *alabdha bhūmikatva*, [YS I.30](#)). But it could also be that in the moment when we resolve a duality in our mind and body, we touch our spiritual nature (*anandamayakoṣha*), which is inherently blissful. Either way, the stillness and the joy that accompanies it are both often short-lived, because there are other parts of the body that remain to be attended to, and they are calling out for our attention. Plus our ego (*asmita*) quickly takes ownership of the paired action, and in that ownership may become attached (both to the action and ownership). If the attachment to the ownership of that paired action prevents us from attending to the rest of the body, even if only for a moment, the stillness and the joy both become quenched. Once we attend to the back leg of *Utthita Trikoṇasana* and learn to perform paired actions that dynamically link the two legs together, then we have another chance to experience a moment of stillness and the joy that can accompany it. Except that now we are expanding the reach of the links over larger expanses of the body. And we begin to notice something new.

We begin to notice that the qualities of the body are changing (*parinama*, [YS III.9-16](#)). We notice that from the solidity (earth element, *prithvi*) of the feet pressing down, and the linking that comes from paired actions, we perceive the elasticity of the body's muscles and connective tissues. That elasticity is one aspect of fluidity in the body, the element of water (*ap*). Once that awareness arises (*udita*, [YS III.14](#)), then we 'own it' or identify with it in such a way that our practice may be informed by how we affect this element. That is, instead of only performing actions that effect solidity and stability in the structural body, we are naturally drawn to actions that also expand the fluidity and enhance the elasticity in the body's tissues. This stage-wise progression (*bhūmisu viniyogah*, [YS III.6](#)) represents a movement of the consciousness (*citta*) from the gross layer of the being (*anamayakoṣha*) to the more subtle layer (*pranamayakoṣha*). That is, it is not that consciousness leaves the structural layer to inhabit the *pranic* layer, but rather that the 'point of action' becomes the *pranic* layer: we identify more with the subtle layer than with the gross layer. And to the degree that we repeat, repose, reflect on and study the actions that gave rise to our more subtle awareness, to that degree we are linking the gross layer to the subtle.

The stage-wise progression is also a transformation of consciousness ([YS III.9-12](#)), and of the body ([YS III.13-16](#)). Each time we become capable of performing a more global action, we do so by resolving some kind of duality, whether it is a duality in the front leg of *Utthita Trikoṇasana*, or the duality of taking the abdomen back towards the lumbar spine without collapsing the chest, or the duality of exerting physical effort without contracting the spiritual heart. And each time we resolve a duality, there is a change in the mind and a corresponding change in the body. These changes are described in detail in [YS III.9-16](#), but it is useful to describe them here in the context of a discussion of linking. *Nirodha parinama* (the restriction transformation of consciousness, [YS III.9](#)) is a change from a tendency to generate thoughts, toward a capacity and tendency to suppress thoughts. In the example above, this

kind of transformation would refer to our ability to suppress the thoughts that lead to oscillating between pressing the inner edge of the front foot in *Utthita Trikonasana* and turning the whole leg out. The thoughts that might lead to such oscillation could be “Now I am pressing the inner edge of the foot, but wait—I forgot to turn my leg out”. If that second thought were to be suppressed at first and replaced with “I have to press my inner foot down, then turn my whole leg out”, then we have a chance to stop the oscillation. We all have the capacity to suppress thoughts to some degree. But the moment this capacity becomes second nature, rather than one that has to be called up with effort each time it is needed, is the moment when both parts of a paired action can be performed at the same time. The mind no longer jumps from one movement to the other.

The next transformation is called *samadhi parinama*, which is where we change from attending consciously to many objects at once to attending to only one thing that encompasses all the individual objects. In the present context this would mean that instead of pressing the inner edge of the foot down and turning the thigh out, we are lengthening and straightening our leg in *Utthita Trikonasana* (by simultaneously pressing inner edge of foot down, and turning the thigh out). In other words, our *citta* attends now to and identifies with only a single paired action that is made up of two separate movements. We certainly know and are conscious of the two separate components of the paired action, but that is no longer where the bulk of our attention rests. Our mind now does not fluctuate between the duality of the separate movements, but it may still alternate from one moment to the next between the single paired action as an independent entity and performing two separate movements at the same time.

The third transformation is *ekagrata parinama*, the ‘one-pointed transformation’ of consciousness, where the same thought arises in the mind from one moment to the next. In the present context, the single paired action as an independent entity is now the only thought that arises from one moment to the next. B.K.S. Iyengar calls this ‘no-pointedness’. At some point in the progression of practice, the doer disappears as a reference for the performance of actions within an asana: actions are being performed but without a doer, without ‘points’.

It is clear how we can use linking as a method to do several things: a) We can gradually perfect our understanding and performance of *asanas*. Patanjali tells us in YS II.48 that once *asanas* are perfected, then we become undisturbed by pairs of opposite, or dualities. When we link within *asanas*, we elicit the inherent dualities in our bodies and our mind, and we resolve them. That is, each dual movement or dual action we start with is replaced or superseded by a single (non-dual) paired action. So, in the process of performing *asanas* by actively linking within the asana, we are both ‘perfecting the asana’ and we are transcending the dualities of mind and body. b) The use of linking progressively transforms consciousness (YS III.9-12) from one that identifies primarily with the gross physical body, to one that is aware of and identifies more strongly with the more subtle vehicles (*koshas*). c) There is a corresponding transformation in our body from one that is governed by stiffness and lack of mobility, to one that is more elastic, mobile and spacious (YS III.13 – 16). There are at least two more important ways one can view linking within the context of the Yoga Sutras. Both of them involve direct reference to the concept of linking by Patanjali, but one of the references is, in a way, a hidden benefit of linking.

First, we can look at sutras [III.45](#) and [III.48](#). In both of these, Patanjali refers to connectedness (*anvaya*), either of the body in YS III.45 (actually of the elements—*bhutas*—but we can apply this to our bodies when we perform *asanas*), or of the sense-organs in YS III.48 (*indriyas*). In these sutras the aim is to practice *samyama* ([YS III.4](#)) in order to master the elements and the sense-organs. Through this mastery one attains to an understanding and vision of the difference between the most refined state of consciousness (*sattva*) and the soul ([YS III.50](#)). And through dispassion toward this vision, one attains liberation (*kaivalya*—[YS III.51](#)). Connectedness of the elements is akin to the linking of the components of our bodies within *asanas*, at each level of linking. Patanjali asks us to attend with concentration to such links, but also to the effects or results of linking (which he calls ‘purposiveness’—*arthavattva*). As we perform paired actions, we are to observe and note what the effects are of performing them.

In III.45 Patanjali asks us to study the gross (*sthula*) and subtle (*sukhma*) aspects of the elements. As we perform *asanas* we can see how, by linking through paired actions the gross element of earth in spatially separate parts of the body, the more subtle elements of water, then air, and eventually spaciousness emerge. And in III.48, Patanjali refers to the form and ‘I-am-ness’ of the sense organs (*svarupa* and *asmita*). These are the corresponding gross and subtle aspects of the sense-organs we can reflect on while performing *asanas*. The sense-organs are also connected or linked: for example, when we feel the components of a paired action, we have a visual experience of the spatial location of each component of the paired action. The effect of this linking between kinesthetic sense and visual sense is to give us an understanding and vision (*khyater*) of the physical linking between the components. And now if we look at our body as we perform the action, we can calibrate our kinesthetic sense to the actual alignments of our limbs.

So far I have focused on the significance of linking as something positive we do. But there is a hidden dimension to linking. What is hidden about linking is revealed when we observe the process of performing a paired action: in the act of linking two movements into a single paired action, we are letting go of something. We are letting go of the identity of each movement as an independent localized entity, in order to learn or become aware of something that has a composite or more global identity. This is a kind of complementary or hidden side of linking—‘unlinking’.

According to Patanjali, both the active or positive act of exerting effort (*abhyasa*) and a renunciation of effort or ‘de-attachment’ (*vairagya*) are necessary to attain *citta vrtti nirodhah* (YS I.2). We have to both ‘do’ and ‘not-do’ in order to make steady progress. In [YS II.17](#) Patanjali tells us that a kind of mistaken linking is at the root of all our suffering: *drastr drsyayoh samyogao heya hetuh* – The correlation (linking—*samyoga*) between the seer (soul-*drastr*) and the seen (nature--*drsyah*) is the cause (*hetu*) of that which is to be overcome (*heya*). The cause of this linking or correlation between seer and seen is spiritual ignorance, *avidya* ([YS II.24](#)), which is mistaking the transient for what is eternal, the impure for the pure, pain for pleasure and that which is not the self for the self. And the means of attaining cessation of both spiritual ignorance and the mistaken linking of seer and seen is the unceasing vision of discernment ([YS II.26](#) *viveka khyatir aviaplava hana upayah*). What is to be discerned are all the things that are mistaken in the state of *avidya*. ‘Vision of discernment’ implies there is not only a knowing that there is a difference, but there is a kind of detachment from that knowing that allows us to see that we know.

When we practice *asanas*, we are not necessarily looking for what is eternal, pure, pleasant and the self. But, then again, when we link, we indirectly seek what is eternal, pure, pleasant and the self: when we perform a paired action, we link two movements that are each transient in time, and we discover a third thing (the paired action) that may also be transient in time. But the paired action has the character that it brings both stillness and joy to the consciousness. The stillness brings us incrementally closer to what is eternal, even if not suddenly the whole way there. And since the paired action extends over and encompasses a greater portion of our many-layered being, it is also bringing us closer to what is whole, to what is the self. Moreover, note that in the moment when we grasp the paired action, we ‘unlink’ our consciousness from the separate dual movements, and also from what is transient, impure, painful and not of the self.

Lastly, once we grasp the distinction between doing two things simultaneously and doing one thing that accomplishes two things, we are ‘unlinking’ the correlation (*samyoga*) between the illusion our consciousness has that it can do more than one thing at a time, and the inherent capacity that the unified and undifferentiated self has to engage in many actions at once (c.f. [YS IV.5 pravritti bhede prayojakam cittam ekam anekesam](#)). The ‘unlinking’ implies that we are cultivating ‘vision of discernment’ (*viveka khyater*) at a basic level. This basic instance of vision of discernment can then progress in stages, and culminates in the seven-fold transcendental insight Patanjali refers to in [YS II.27](#). In summary, we can say that linking causes the consciousness to horizontally permeate the being at the level of a particular *kosha*, and the complementary ‘unlinking’ that is necessary for successful linking allows consciousness to become more refined, to develop in a ‘vertical’ (inward) direction.

Footnotes: translations are from B. K. S. Iyengar, [Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali](#). Author’s comments are in brackets. Additional translations for certain Sanskrit terms are used from Georg Feuerstein, [The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali](#).

1. II.48 *tatah dvandvah anabhighatah* From then on, the *sadhaka* is undisturbed by dualities.
2. III.9 *vyutthana nirodha samskarayoh abhibhava pradurbhavau nirodha ksana cittan anvayah nirodha parinamah* Study of the silent moments (*ksana*) between rising and restraining subliminal impressions is the transformation of consciousness towards restraint (*nirodha parinamah*).
3. I.2 *yogah citta vrtti nirodhah* Yoga is the cessation of movements in the consciousness
4. II.46 *sthira sukham asanam* Asana is perfect firmness of body, steadiness of intelligence and benevolence of spirit.
5. I.30 *vyadhi styana samsaya pramada alasya avirati bhrantidarsana alabdhabhumikatva anavasthitatvani cittaviksepah te antarayah* These obstacles are disease, inertia, doubt, heedlessness, laziness, indiscipline of the senses, erroneous views, lack of perseverance, and backsliding.
6. III.10 *tasya prasantavahita samaskarat* The restraint of rising impressions brings about an undisturbed flow of tranquility.
7. III.11 *sarvarthata ekagratayoh ksaya udayau cittasya samadhi parinamah* The weakening of scattered attention and the rise of one-pointed attention in the *citta* is the transformation towards *samadhi*.

8. III.12 *tatah punah santa uditau tulya pratyayau cittasya ekagrata parinamah* When the rising and falling thought processes are in balance, one-pointed consciousness emerges. Maintenance of awareness with keen intensity from one-pointed attention to no-pointed attentiveness is *ekagrata parinama*. [Feuerstein translates *tulya* as 'similar', so one-pointed consciousness may be said to emerge when thoughts are the same from one moment to the next, that is, there is no fluctuation from moment to moment between the thought and the recognition of a thinker, which would be a different thought—there is no thinker.]
9. III.13 *etena bhutendriyesu dharma laksana avastha parinamah* Through these three phases, cultured consciousness is transformed from its potential state (*dharma*) towards further refinement (*laksana*) and the zenith of refinement (*avastha*). In this way, the transformations of elements, senses and mind takes place. [*bhuta* is translated as elements, which are earth, water, fire, air, ether. But since these elements are how we experience through the senses, they can be interpreted as how the body is experienced.]
10. III.14 *santa udita avyapadesya dharma anupati dharma* The substrata [dharma] is that which continues to exist and maintain its characteristic quality in all states (dharma), whether manifest, latent, or subdued.
11. III.15 *krama anyatvam parinama anyatve hetuh* Successive sequential changes [krama] cause the distinctive changes [*parinama*] in the consciousness.
12. III.16 *parinama traya samyamat atita anagatajnanam* By mastery of the three transformations of nature(*dharma*), quality (*laksana*) and condition (*avastha*), through *samyama* on the *nirodha*, *samadhi*, and *ekagrata* states of consciousness, the yogi acquires knowledge of the past and the future.
13. III.6 *tasya bhumisu viniyogah* Its progression [*viniyogah*] is gradual [*bhumisu*—stagewise].
14. III.45 *sthula svarupa sukma anvaya arthavatva samyamat bhutajayah* By *samyama* on the elements—their mass, forms, subtlety, conjunction and purposes, the yogi becomes Lord over them all. [*anvaya* is here translated as conjunction, but can also be translated as connectedness.]
15. III.48 *grahana svarupa asmita anvaya arthavattva samyamat indriyajayah* Through *samyama* upon the purpose of the conjunction of the process of knowing, the ego, and nature, there is mastery over the senses.
16. III.4 *trayam ekatra samyama* These three together—*dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*—constitute integration or *samyama*.
17. III.50 *sattva purusa anyata khyatimatrasya sarvabhava adhisthatrtvam sarvajnatrtvam ca* Only one who knows the difference [*anyata*] between the illuminative intelligence [*sattva*] and the seer [*purusha*] attains supreme knowledge of all that exists and all that manifests.
18. III.51 *tadvairagyat api dosabijaksaye kaivalyam* By destruction of the seeds of bondage and the renunciation [*vairagya*] of even these powers [and dispassion towards the knowledge of the difference between seer and illuminative intelligence], comes eternal emancipation [kaivalya].
19. II.17 *drastrdrsyayoh samyogah heyahetuh* The cause of pain is the association [*samyoga*—linking] or identification of the seer (*atma*) with the seen (*prakriti*) and the remedy lies in their dissociation.

20. II.24 *tasya hetuh avidya* Lack of spiritual understanding (*avidya*) is the cause [hetu] of the false identification of the seer with the seen.
21. II.26 *vivekha khyatih aviplava hanopayah* The ceaseless flow of discriminative knowledge [*vivekha khyatih*—‘vision of discernment’] in thought, word and deed destroys ignorance (*avidya*), the source of pain.
22. IV.5 *pravrtti bhede prayojakam cittam ekam anekesam* Consciousness is one, but it branches into many different types of activities and innumerable thought-waves.
23. II.27 *tasya saptadha prantabhumih prajna* Through this unbroken flow of discriminative awareness [‘vision of discernment’], one gains perfect knowledge which has seven spheres.