

yoga and climbing Part I

by Annie Anderson



Annie at the hot springs of Pamukkale

Svadharna

“Find out what your Svadharna is. Ask yourself, “How do I feel when doing certain things? Does something come easy? Is it natural for me or am I trying to imitate somebody?” First, take stock of your natural inclination and your capability which is your taste, temperament and capacity. With some things it’s so natural. You’re like a fish in water. You just know: “Ahh, that’s what I’m meant to do.” In Sanskrit. It is called your Svadharna.” (1)

All systems are created by human beings and often one human being, so it is important to question what system is good for you. Siddhartha did not believe blindly, he wanted to find out the truth for himself. This required him being open and courageous and accepting all the consequences of his actions. His own journey of understanding and meaning had to unfold from within himself - he listened to his internal dialogue. To quote from David Swenson; “Patanjali’s analogy is the perfect image. Wisdom and spirituality unfold in the same manner as a tree grows. Nature is steady and gradual.

The world of Yoga with its myriad styles and approaches may be likened to a forest filled with variety and colour. Every tree in a forest has the same goal: to reach toward the light. One tree’s method is not better than another’s. Each species has individual characteristics which enable it to grow to its greatest potential. The various Yoga systems are unique, yet all have the same purpose: to grow towards

enlightenment.” (2) Each of us is a unique person with different abilities and qualities. Part of Yoga is to find your own Yoga.

The same should be true about climbing. In climbing we should want to learn to understand how our own mind (thoughts, emotions, intentions, perceptions and expectations) and our own body (chemistry, viscera, muscular system) work and interact. Not just on the surface but deep down. Wittgenstein may not have been a yogi, but the following quote fits the Yoga philosophy and can be applied to climbing: “Getting hold of the difficulty deep down is what is hard. Because if it’s grasped [at the] surface, it simply remains the difficulty it was. It has to be pulled out by the roots, and that involves our beginning to think about these things in a new way. The new way of thinking is what is so hard to establish. Once the new way has been established, the old problems vanish; indeed they become hard to recapture. For they go with our way of expressing ourselves and, if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment.” (3)

What works for one person might not work for another. Legendary climber John Gill tells us to, “Be aware of the strong pull of the mainstream - go out and try something novel, be an individual and look for your own way in climbing.” (4) Georg Feurstein writes, “The yogin is not satisfied with theorising, guessing or accepting facts second hand - he takes his own experience (*pratyaksa* or perception) as the highest criterion.” (5)

Taking responsibility and thinking for yourself is at the root of both climbing and Yoga. It requires a conscious effort to establish autonomy in consciousness, to really understand ourselves and ask the question ‘Who am I?’. Each climber or yogin deals with challenges that confront them in her own way and each situation is unique to that individual. Eric Schiffmann advises us, “You will then

understand that you have truly learned how to do Yoga only when you've become your own best teacher which means being guided from within." (6)

Both climbing and Yoga require that you take responsibility for your decisions, engage with the moment and keep attentive. For a yogin and climber conscious effort, authenticity, desire from within, self-discovery, and openness are key to learning. A strong commitment and courage to understand ourselves is needed to accomplish changes. Yoga and climbing are a continuous process and life time's experience.

Asana

Patanjali tells us that the mastery of asanas occurs when practice becomes effortless - "*Prayatna saithilya ananta samapattibhyam.*" BKS Iyengar translates this sutra as, "Perfection in an asana is achieved when the effort to perform it becomes effortless." (7) Is it not the same when we see a climber whose movement is fluid and effortless, easy, elegant and aesthetic? Legendary climber John Gill looked for the effortless and the aesthetics of pure movement on the rock. He tells us, "A boulder problem (a short climb on a boulder) is not truly solved if it is not mastered with elegance and grace." (8)

Brian Cooper explains, "The essence of asana is sometimes described as '*Sthira Sukha*', meaning strong and comfortable." (9) *Asana* and *vinyasa* must be practised with a balance of strength and relaxedness, effort and surrender. A climber's movement is the same. A climber must be powerful and strong, but also relaxed and fluid.

The 'Bhagavad Gita' tells us that; "*Yoga samatva uchyate.*" - "Yoga is the state of balance." Maintaining balance and fluid movement is essential in climbing or when practising *vinyasa* or balance postures. When you let go of one hold and reach for the next you must maintain balance, often on tiny holds. When you bring your foot forward into *Virabhadrasana I* (Warrior I) during *Surya Namaskara* (Sun Salutation B), and reach up with your hands, you must stay in balance.

Jumping in and out of postures, as in *Surya Namaskara*, keeps the mind alert and improves co-ordination as does keeping in balance on a smooth, slabby climb. Shiva Rea explains that *vinyasa* is not just a sequence of postures but is the "Intelligence that connects one moment, one breath, one action to the next." (10) Through *vinyasa* a climber can cultivate a meditative state in a relaxed setting away from the rock, develop a continuity of awareness of breath and become familiar with how it feels to be focused, confident, fluid and continuous from one movement to the next. These subtle proprioceptive insights can be carried over into climbing.

To make smooth transitions and weight transfer when climbing or practising asanas we must be conscious of our relationship to gravity. Our centre of gravity shifts with each movement we make. Aline Newton writes: "Like the air around us, our relationship with gravity is so basic, so fundamental, that we rarely think of it. Yet it underlies - sets the tone for - every one of our actions and behaviours." (11)

Exploring our centre of gravity in asana practice is helpful for

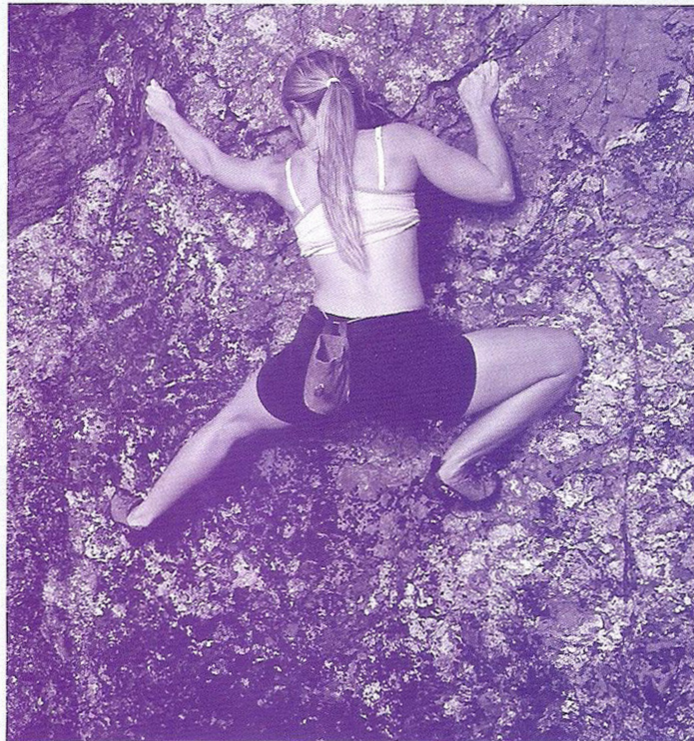
climbing. For instance, when we move from *Trikonasana* (Triangle) to *Ardha Chandrasana* (Half Moon Pose), we learn to transfer our weight on to one foot. This is a similar move to climbing when we step up and transfer our weight on to a foothold and then counterbalance with our free leg to maintain balance.

Precise footwork is one of the most important techniques to master in climbing. Strong, supple feet and mobile ankles are important for climbers. Yoga teaches us to be aware of our feet. Accurate foot placement and alignment is crucial. Brian Cooper says, "As in all asanas, the placement of the feet are fundamental to maintaining lightness, stability and dynamism." (12) The same is true for climbers. Tias Little also agrees that, "Every so often, it's a good idea to make your feet your primary focus through a whole Yoga practice. Almost every Yoga pose engages the feet and reflects their actions up through the body in a slightly different way." (13)

Strong legs also play an important role in pushing when climbing. Balance postures "make the leg muscles powerful and gives one steadiness and poise." (14) One-legged balance postures such as

Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana (Extended Hand to Big Toe Posture) train the proprioceptors in your legs, feet and ankles and cultivate concentration.

Asanas such as *Plank*, *Chaturanga Dandasana* (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) and *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward Facing Dog) support and balance a climber's antagonist muscles, helping to avoid injuries. *Chaturanga Dandasana* also helps a climber to understand subtle 'push and pull' forces and their relationship to gravity. Brian Cooper tells us, "This asana (*Chaturanga Dandasana*) means 'four limbed stick posture' and the aim is to make the body as rigid as possible. This makes it a highly effective asana where opposing forces must be used intelligently to counteract gravity." (15) Mr Iyengar tells us, "This



pose strengthens the arms and the wrists develop mobility and power." (16) Wrists, elbows, shoulders and forearms take a lot of stress when climbing. Mr Iyengar explains how *Parsvottanasana* (Intense Side Stretch), "relieves stiffness in the leg and hip muscles . . . the wrists move freely and any stiffness there disappears . . . the posture also corrects round and drooping shoulders." This asana brings balance to a climber's overworked back muscles. (17) A strong core allows us to have smoother, more efficient and better co-ordinated movement. It is as important to have a strong core to stop your feet swinging off when climbing on steep rock as it is to have a strong core in asanas such as *Plank*, *Vasisthasana* (Side Plank Pose), *Chaturanga Dandasana* (Four Limbed Staff Pose) or *Purvottanasana* (Intense Stretch of the East). Moving from a strong core is essential to climbing fluidly, without effort. Liz Koch explains, "True strength, stability and autonomy comes when the connection between the various parts of you work in harmony." (18)

It is important to be aware and active throughout the pose or a climbing move and not just to maintain tension in one area, such as the arms. The tension can also run through the core, connecting feet

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to hands. Working with the bandhas, *Mula Bandha* (Root Lock), and *Uddiyana Bandha* (Flying Upwards) throughout the practice creates core stability and strength. David Coulter talks about core strength: "A sure way to develop what yogis call inner strength is to tone the abdominal region. If energy in the arms and shoulders is weak, a strong abdomen can give you an extra edge, but if the abdomen is weak, look out, because even the strongest arms and shoulders are likely to fail you." (19)

BKS Iyengar tells us that "The right method of doing asanas brings lightness and an exhilarating feeling in the body as well as the mind and a feeling of oneness of body, mind and soul." (20) The same feeling could be said for a climber who has made the right sequence of moves on a challenging climb, where they have worked with gravity and experienced lightness, flow and focus.

To be continued . . .

Annie has been researching the similarities in climbing and Yoga for the last 5 years. She began climbing in 1992 and instructing in 1998. You can visit her web site www.exploreclimbing.com or email her at annie@exploreclimbing.com.

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