

# yoga and climbing

Part 3  
by Annie Anderson



Annie at the hot springs of Pamukkale

## Pranayama

BKS Iyengar states that "Prana means breath, respiration, life, vitality, wind, energy or strength. 'Ayama' means length, expansion, stretching or restraint." Pranayama, the art of yogic breathing, is the control of the movements of the breath. It is the 4th limb in the 8 limbs of the Yoga tree. Georg Feurstein tells us that "Pranayama is thus the 'control of the prana', of which the regulation of the breath is but the most external practice." The conscious use of the breath is most important in any Yoga practice or climbing movement. Mukunda Stiles tells us that, "The breath is the string that ties all the other practices together into a cohesive whole." The breathing process is connected directly to the brain and the central nervous system. Professor Krishnamacharya tells us: "Let the breath be your Guru."

Observing the breath allows us to take a deep look at the nature of

emotions such as fear and anxiety and helps to bring about an understanding of how our mind works. "Precisely because its ripples influence so many human functions, a thorough understanding of the breath provides a powerful tool for expanding our awareness of the various dimensions of the body and mind."

Emotions and feelings have a strong connection with the breath and are expressed in the way that we breathe. The Sutras tell us, "By regulating the breath we regulate our minds, because the two always go together." The regular practice of harmonising the breath with movement (such as Surya Namaskara) increases self awareness and reflects on climbing movement. Ashtanga students are taught to use the Ujjayi breath, which means Powerful or Expansive Breath. The Ujjayi breath stimulates vagal nerve afferents to the brain, increasing

attention and vigilance. The increase in vagal tone activates the parasympathetic nervous system, decreasing the heart rate and calming the mind. Ujjayi breathing can bring focus to the mind when climbing through challenging moves. Demanding climbing situations require a calm and balanced mind. If you focus your attention on your breath, then you will be in the moment. Breath awareness is essential when climbing and practising Yoga. Listen to the breath, like Siddhartha listened to the river!

### thought

David Bohm gives us an interesting metaphor for thought. He talks about when he first rode a horse. The man from whom he was hiring the horse told him: "You must think faster than the horse, or else you will go where it wants to go." Using this metaphor of the horse, we can see that thought can also put us to sleep by its gentle comfortable rhythm. Unless we are aware and mindful of thought it can take us off in all sorts of directions. Bohm's definition of thought is that thought is not fresh, direct perception: "It is that which has been thought – the past carried through into the present". In time our experiences fade, but they are effectively stored in memory where they wait to be instantly recalled the next time a similar situation is encountered.

How does this relate to climbing and Yoga? Fresh perceptions do not occur unless you are aware of these repetitive 'thought' patterns. If you are not being mindful and simply following habitual thought, then you will not learn or have any insights. By becoming an observer of your thoughts, you are less likely to be overwhelmed by them and won't react to them in a mindless way. The Buddha tells us that, "The mind is everything; what you think, you become."

Next time you are practising Yoga or climbing, create space and become conscious of your thoughts. Notice thoughts that drain your energy in a Yoga posture or when climbing. Notice the thoughts that reinforce or generate good energy. Breaking loose from patterns of thinking are important for learning.

"*Vitarka Badhane Pratipaksa Bhavanam.*" This Sutra translates as: "When disturbed by negative thoughts, opposite ones should be thought of." This is a way to bridle a negative thought before it becomes overwhelming. Stop and think: 'What will happen if I continue with this thought? What effect would it have?' Often our ideas about situations or other people may not be very clear and reacting harshly could create problems. Any opportunity to have second thoughts is worth considering. By stopping and creating a space between the thought and the action, you will be mindful and not just react. You may have ineffective beliefs and attitudes such as a restrictive comfort zone or a negative self-label ('I am a slow climber, or my footwork is not good') that hold you back. Identifying negative thoughts and changing them can help you to progress.

### expectations!

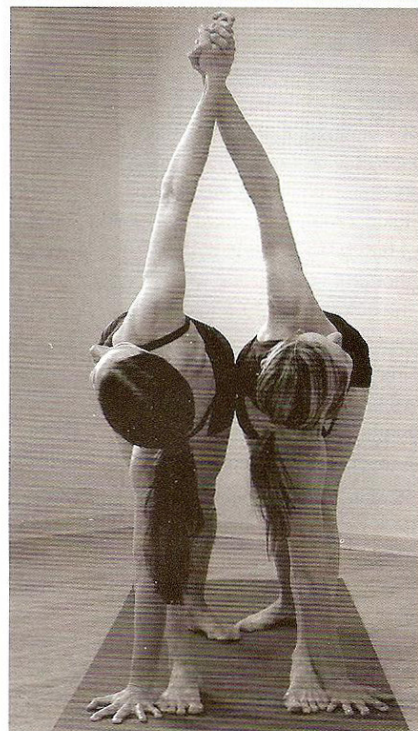
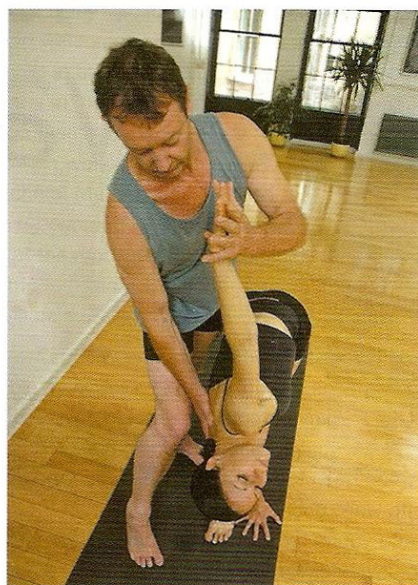
Sri Swami Satchidananda often quotes the Sloka "*Yogah karmasu kaushalam*" as a definition of Yoga. It translates as: "Perfection in action is Yoga - An act becomes perfect when you do it with all joy and without expecting anything in return." We often have expectations before we climb a route or before practising Yoga. If we attach ourselves to our expectations, good or bad, they may corner us. If the expectation does not live up to what actually happens, it can disclose itself as a negative experience. This negative experience can arise again and again. Even if you have a positive experience you may expect it to be like that the next time, and you'll be wondering why it isn't. It is better to have a clear mind and climb or practise Yoga with no specific expectation. Mukunda Stiles tells his new students: "Leave your expectations at the door with your shoes."

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](http://www.exploreclimbing.com) or email her at [annie@exploreclimbing.com](mailto:annie@exploreclimbing.com).

## The Art of Adjusting (continued)

7



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### resistance adjustments

*Photo 7:* To encourage more twisting in the torso, the adjuster provides a resistance to the student's upper hand. The student is asked to push against this resistance, and this provides the leverage necessary to achieve a deeper twist. Note that the adjuster's lower hand is providing a counterforce on the student's lower shoulderblade, which moves her even deeper into the twist.

### partners

*Photo 8:* Although it may not strictly be considered an adjustment in the normal sense, partner work is a beautiful way to explore alignment, balance, sensitivity and awareness. It is the ultimate in co-operating with your partner and in doing so paradoxically focuses awareness on yourself.

Brian has been practising Yoga since 1970 and teaching since 1990. He is the founder and principal teacher for Union Yoga Teacher Training. [www.unionyogateachertraining.co.uk](http://www.unionyogateachertraining.co.uk) and also teaches workshops around the country and at his retreat centre in the northwest of Scotland. [www.briancooper.eu](http://www.briancooper.eu) Brian's book is available wholesale and retail from [www.harmonypublishing.org](http://www.harmonypublishing.org) A review appears on page 48.