THE INNER TRADITION OF YOGA

A GUIDE TO YOGA PHILOSOPHY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTITIONER

MICHAEL STONE

REVISED EDITION

"Intense, poetic, wise, practical, intimate, and visionary—the mind-body connection has never been better explored or explained."
—SHARON GANNON, cofounder of Jivamukti Yoga
The Inner Tradition of Yoga
Also by Michael Stone
Awake in the World
Freeing the Body, Freeing the Mind
Yoga for a World Out of Balance
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Foreword by Richard Freeman

SHAMBHALA BOULDER 2018
In the summer of 2007, just before my son turned four, I went to Cape Cod at the invitation of a friend and wrote the book you now hold in your hands. It came to life just as the tiny sangha I started in my garage began to form in Toronto, where we integrated movement practices, textual study, meditation, and social action.

A decade later I now live on a small island on the coast of British Columbia where forest and ocean and family are all pressed together. Our yard is filled with fruit trees, and in the early mornings I watch the ocean arrange itself: blue and green, rising and falling, common and also a miracle. Our small community has grown to an international network without walls, and my partner is pregnant with what will be my fourth child.

I used to wake with the birds, practice forty-five minutes of sitting meditation, followed by almost three hours of asana practice. Each week I had structured time for study, and I was constantly going on silent retreats. Now, I travel internationally, and I see my formal practice (I still meditate and study and practice movement) much more integrated into daily activities, like washing the dishes and picking up Legos after the kids fall asleep. Now I like to invert how I conceive practice: the spiritual practice is answering emails and making the bed, and the informal practice is sitting still and lighting incense.

There is no daily practice without some formal training; and there is
no deep spiritual training without the mess of relational life. The two are one.

In this new edition I’ve edited any areas where I’ve idealized a liberation that’s free from the suffering of being human. There is no way beyond this human life. Yoga is a practice that helps us be more present with the actual, fluid life we are living right now. Yoga is a practice of being intimate with moment-to-moment reality, without holding on. Since being alive in this way teaches us that our actions have an echo, we begin to see that how we speak, move our body, and use our minds is both a gift and a responsibility. The more we see through our reactivity, while transforming the momentum of old habits, the more we begin to enjoy our lives and tune in to the pain and joy and experience of others.

My emphasis in editing this new edition has been to keep the theory I’ve learned tied to the path I’m living, and that’s why I’ve focused on the key themes that there is no awakening separate from the body; the self is a construct that can be seen and released again and again; that everything is empty except of relationship; and that our actions make a difference. We are all living, rejoicing, crying, and dying together. It’s my deep intuition that there is really no other way to engage in a life that matters than to feel for each other, take in the plight of our planet, and do whatever we can within our means, to serve. The ways we can serve are only limited by our creativity.

There is no yoga without the conditions of your life. This book describes how to work with those conditions and see that there is just this one precious moment; it contains the past and the future, and we can’t hold on to it.

Michael Stone
Southern Gulf Islands, British Columbia, 2017
The Inner Tradition of Yoga
4. Embodying the Path

The one light appears in diverse forms.
—Atharva-Veda

For yoga to continue as a living tradition, it is important to study, practice, and continually wrestle with the basic teachings offered by teachers and texts. Without committed practice and critical engagement with the tradition, yoga becomes something of only antiquarian interest. The poet Czeslaw Milosz asks, “What good is poetry if it cannot save nations or people?” The same question should be put to yoga.

When we accept without question ideas taught within the different yoga traditions as ultimate truths, the practice becomes dogmatic and oppressive. But when there is a practitioner, like Rama in the Yoga Vāsiṣṭa or Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gītā, who asks, “What do these elite practices have to do with my suffering and my life in the face of death? What is this life that I find myself in?” yoga opens afresh. For the student who approaches practice and teachings with a receptive and critical mind, practice and awakening become less to do with ideological or orthodox understanding and more to do with a response in the here and now to the great questions of life. Yoga is not about conforming to other people’s definitions of practice but simply an authentic response to the questions presented by our life, our path. If yoga points at the truth of existence, that very existence must be available to us in every moment, not as a new belief system or a utopia to arrive at in a future life, but
something we can touch, maintain, and discover for ourselves. “Better
to do one’s own work dutifully than to do another’s well,” Kṛṣṇa says to
Arjuna in the final chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā.

One of the last teachings on yoga in the Bhagavad Gītā, much like
the initial teachings of abhyāsa (practice) and vairāgya (letting go) in the
Yoga-Sutra, is the injunction to continually test out the field between
theory and practice. This is vital because without this exchange, we are
practicing someone else’s ideas or the teachings from another culture
without genuinely wrestling with those ideas ourselves. For yoga to be a
living tradition, we need to integrate committed practice with a teacher
alongside critical engagement with the core axioms of the particular
yoga system we are studying so that the teachings come alive in this
culture, in this time, in this human experience. This concept was artic-
ulated beautifully by Jorge Luis Borges when he wrote,

Everything happens for the first time,
But in that way, it is eternal.
Whoever lights a match in the dark is inventing fire.
Whoever goes down to a river goes down to the Ganges.
Whoever reads my words is inventing them.³

Yoga is timeless. This does not mean it is eternal or ephemeral, but
simply available, always, in each unfolding moment, when we settle
into the essence of who we are. The great questions of life and death
are settled in the stillness of the mind and the direct actions of a self
unfettered by itself. A seeming paradox at first, the yoga practitioner is
nothing other than the vast range of the universe. When we practice,
the central axis of one’s own body becomes the Ganges. We discover
the essence of the body to be nothing other than the great rivers of the
earth, the vast sky, and the winds of the breath. And regardless of the
conditions in which we find ourselves—depressed, flowing, polluted,
clear, transparent, slow, or thick as mud—we practice.
Lowering Your Center of Gravity

The practice of yoga postures, what is commonly referred to as Hatha Yoga, belongs within the domain of Tantra Yoga. The term *tantra* is a combination of two roots: *tan* (to loom, warp, or do something in precise detail) and *tra* (to protect). Tantra begins with noticing the breath and its energetic aspects in the center of the body in great detail. What at first seems like the obvious rhythm of the breath, for example, opens up to show us the subtle winds that make up the breath, the impermanent nature of all our thoughts and feelings, and the inherent unity between the breath and the great vibration that is all living reality. This precision of attention interrupts our common mental distractions, the root causes of duḥkha.

While there are many misconceptions about tantra as a sexual practice or an esoteric model of visualization, and while some forms of tantra do include such practices, the wider sense of the term is the study of the energetic relationship of mind and body in order to shift the mind out of its distracted habits into a deeper relationship with the basic constituents of nature. As we begin working with mind and body, we become acutely aware of energetic shifts in the body, whether in the feelings, temperature, nervous system, or breathing. Learning how to work with the energies of mind and body is the core practice of tantra. Tantra is psychological in essence because we have to learn to let go of the momentum of distracted and reactive mental habits in order to feel and move with energetic changes in the body. The body is studied and felt, sculpted and investigated, until it becomes treated as a microcosm of the greater universe. The study of reality begins with the body, because there is no perceived world independent of mind and body.

In Hatha Yoga, the center of the body is the base of the pelvic diaphragm. Like a wheel (*chakra*) or circle, the pelvic diaphragm floats above and is stretched between the dense corners of the pelvis: two sitting bones, the pubic bone, and the coccyx. Like looking down into the
base of a flowerpot, the internal symmetry of the pelvic floor is circular with an empty center hollowed above the perineum. At the end of an exhale, a contraction occurs behind the abdominal well that ends in the center of the pelvic floor. This is called *mūla bandha* (the rooting bond), in which the breath creates tone in the pelvic floor and the mind is present enough to experience the action. There are two key points here: (1) that the breath cycle is organized to complete the exhale in its entirety, and (2) that one’s awareness is focused and steady enough to be present at the end of the out-breath. This is but one example of the yoking of mind, breath, and body. Tantra is the science of paying attention, and the basic practices of attention begin in the body via the breath. And as in many yoga practices, physical technique and psychology cannot be separated.

The center of the pelvic floor is also the center of gravity for a human being. In yoga, we are always moving toward the center of things: whether thoughts, feelings, sensations, or breath cycles. All movement is initiated from the center of the pelvic floor, and the breath as an energetic pattern completes itself in a pause at *mūla bandha* and begins again where it ends. The death and rebirth of the breath cycle in physical form is felt most acutely in the pelvic diaphragm as we come in direct contact with the arising, spreading, and eventual contraction and disbanding of each movement as felt in the stream of each breath. We pay attention to the pelvic diaphragm in breathing practices and yoga postures not only because it challenges our ability to stay present while doing one action but also because this area is the center of the human body, and a micro-cosmic window into the center of reality.

In the center of the human body we find the center of all things, because when breath, mind, and body come together in an instant of experience, reality unfolds. Reality unfolds when the mind can stay completely present in a breath cycle, especially at the completion of an exhale. The exhale completes itself in the pelvic floor, the center of gravity, the resting place of the mind. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* describes this clearly:
Just as a bird tied by a string, after flying in various directions without finding a resting-place elsewhere settles down (at last) at the place where it is bound, so also the mind, my dear, after flying in various directions without finding a resting-place elsewhere, settles down in breath, for the mind, my dear, is bound to breath.\(^4\)

Yoga psychology sees the mind and breath as bound together in the frame of the human body. There is no mind without breath, no stillness in the body without stillness in the mind, and no stillness in the mind without settled breath.

Mūla bandha, much like yoga itself, is not something you do but rather something that occurs spontaneously when you are present with the completion of an exhalation. When the breath naturally comes to completion, there is a feeling of toning and drawing up in the center of the pelvic region just above the perineum. Once the pelvic diaphragm tones, as the out-breath turns around and becomes an in-breath, the center of the floor curls up and lifts toward the roof of the mouth, turning from concave into a convex apex. This was discovered by yogis to be a perfect object of meditation, because it requires concentration, excellent breathing, steadiness in the nerves, patience, and interest in the body and mind in this very moment. This same truth can be discovered by all of us when we focus our attention in one place for long enough. Mūla bandha is a spontaneous gesture in the center of the human body that occurs when the breath cycle is allowed to complete itself without the interference of the mind. Hatha Yoga is the cultivation of careful and precise observation via imagination and feeling, and forms the basis of later psychological techniques in meditation practice. Treating our yoga postures and breathing practices as meditation techniques opens up deeper and deeper feeling pathways, and it is through those very pathways that the world moves through us.

We pay attention, even when nothing is happening. And after some time, we will find there is something in that seeming nothing.
“If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four,” writes the composer John Cage. “If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.” Mūla bandha is a meditation technique that uses the energetic movements in the body, via the breath cycle, as a neutral anchor point for the mind.

As we slow down and investigate our experience from moment to moment, we are, in essence, studying the way we organize and construct experience. Slowing down gives us an opportunity to get to know what we are investigating, rather than just falling into the usual habit of layering our theories over everything we encounter. Learning the techniques of mūla bandha teaches us to be present with the feelings, thoughts, emotions, and breath cycles occurring right at the center of human experience.

The word guru comes over to English as “gravity.” Guru denotes a center of gravity. The root gu stands for darkness; ru for its removal. The guru, or the teacher, then is one who sheds light in the darkness of avidyā. The guru is one who understands the law of gravity and other basic laws of the universe, including the law of impermanence and the truth of duḥkha. Although the guru is sometimes embodied in an external person or entity, it is always actually your own center of gravity. The manifestation of these teachings is ultimately experienced within one’s own body and mind. When your heart opens up, your internal center of gravity is revealed. Connecting with one’s center of gravity is the embodiment of stillness.

One of the most radical precepts of yoga is that the elements that make up the universe at large are the same as those at work in each individual being. Watching the breath reverse its course at the bottom of an exhalation cuts into the center of reality itself if our attention is totally focused. “What’s here is everywhere,” says the narrator of the epic Mahābhārata, “and what isn’t here is nowhere.” The way we process sensory data that arrive through our sense organs and mind demonstrates how we organize our experience of the cosmos. Watching the
breath can be like watching the birth-and-death cycle of the universe. Everything is actually right here with us in each moment of perception, organization, and experience.

This is significant for our practice in that, as we construct our experience from moment to moment, so too do we construct our suffering. Our experience of suffering or dissatisfaction (duḥkha) always occurs in the present moment. But this also means that we don’t leave the present moment in order to work with suffering. Rather what we do is focus directly on the processing of present experience, because that is where our crucial troubles play themselves out. We stop looking outside of ourselves for the causes of suffering. We stop waiting in vain for the world to change so that we can finally feel peace. Instead, we begin to see that duḥkha is nothing other than present reality multiplied by resistance.

This means we don’t necessarily need to look to the past for explanations, or worry about repeating addictive patterns in the future. This can be a difficult approach for the western mind to grasp. But this is so because the past is encoded in the present. Therefore, we need only to stay with what is arising right now and investigate it without coming out of it.

The word yoga denotes union. This implies that yoga is the cultivation of no-separation, a space where we can be in something with clarity without separating from it. Or to describe it in another way, through yoga we come to see that there is nothing to cultivate, because underneath distraction and aversion, everything is always already joined.

Right here and right now is where everything important is happening. This is where we pay attention. The breath and the body are always present, so we breathe our circumstances. From there we develop the skills necessary to deal with difficulty, rather than reinforcing habits of aversion. This helps us use the mind efficiently—as a locator of the proper frame of reference. And we need proper qualities of mind to see clearly and to feel what is there to be felt before letting it pass on. In this process we gain wisdom. The ability to separate the act from its object
helps us become more sensitive to the act before it becomes overwhelming. When we can observe the coming and going of chronic pain, for example, we can learn how to be with it, how to bear it, how to breathe as it arises and passes away. This is the powerful skill of being able to see something arising, changing, and passing away without getting personally caught up in it.

With chronic or any other kind of pain, including emotional pain, we sometimes use so much energy and effort trying to escape it that we actually increase the original pain. Often, when we feel pain in the body we react to it with aversion, stories, memories, association, and conceptualizations. This cycle can happen so fast that it is almost impossible to notice. We come to think of pain and our reaction to it as one and the same. But what yoga asks us to do and gives us tools to do is slow down the way we perceive our experience so that we can see more clearly.

**Participating in Each Moment**

Each time we run away from our experience, we plant seeds of repetition. This means that the next time an event occurs that seems similar to a past event, we meet that experience with the conditioned response systems we have constructed and reinforced in the mind, body, and nervous system. We create feedback loops in the *saṃskāras* (psychophysical grooves) and in the *nadis* (feeling and feedback pathways) that keep us running away from the experience, both pleasurable and painful.

The question is then, is there a way to notice sensation when it arises and ride it out to its dissolution? This is what we are examining through yoga. If one can practice with curiosity, rather than reactivity, then one can become familiar enough with one’s own patterns to get under them before they take over. Through practice we can eliminate all forms of reaction. When there is no reaction, we are free to take action. In other words, when reactive patterns are suspended or let go of altogether, we can respond in any given situation without reaction to that situation.
Bound up in all this is an important distinction between reaction and response. They are not the same. The question is: how are they different? Most of us, most of the time, are busy reacting, that is, springing into our own habits and mental games the moment we encounter anything new. Response, on the other hand, refers to a spontaneous way of being in which we can accept and recognize what is actually occurring and take an appropriate action. Since we are usually so reactive, it is hard to first recognize what is actually occurring. Our perception is clouded with preference. Once we can recognize what is happening in a moment of experience, we can accept it and allow it to unfold without trying to escape. When we can accept something, we can investigate it in depth and release our instinctive movements toward identifying with the content of experience. When we respond rather than react, pain is pain, a feeling is a feeling, and things are a little simpler, as they are simply aspects of nature, coming, transforming, and passing on.

In the course of paying close attention to the breath, mind, and body, we discover that the experience of the present moment consists of results from past and present actions. By paying attention we find karma alive in ourselves. The law of karma is simply that volitional action always has an effect. Previous experience influences present experience, and what we do in the present influences the way we experience the future. This means karma operates in feedback loops. The present moment is shaped by both past and present actions. Present action shapes not only the future but also the present. There is nothing that separates who we are from all that comes to be. Our actions and intentions all contribute to how things are. In short, our dispositions are implicated in everything we do. Our experience is filtered through our preconditioned sense organs and mind. In a sense, we are filters, unique and unrepeatable synthesizers of life. Thus our task is to let our experience pass through us in a way that does not negatively contribute to the activity of the world. Don’t make things worse!

Usually *karma* is translated into English as “fate.” But this is a
misunderstanding. The word *vipāka* refers to the effect of an action. The word *karma*, however, refers to both volitional action and its effects. “Wherever there is fire,” Kṛṣṇa says in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, “there is smoke.” Our actions are always followed by residue.

No thing that we can experience exists independent of our intentions and actions—no substance, no answer, no final separation between who we are, what we do, and the deep questions life presents us. Our actions have consequences. Causality in terms of yoga means that when we see suffering and greed, envy and fear, aggression and rigidity in the world around us and decide we do not want to contribute to these states, then we must make our minds, hearts, and bodies become filters for those states. We practice so that we may clear those potentials.

I meditate on causality so that I can work with my own capacity for greed, violence, or intolerance, and in that way my whole being becomes a filter for the culture’s tendencies toward these states of being. It is as though by practicing what seems like an internal practice, we make a form of social action. Examining causality allows us to see that our internal work of meditation flows out into the world around us. The way it flows depends on how we participate in each moment. When we understand causality we begin to see the yoga of relation, that is, we must seek truth and change within ourselves; we cannot find it outside.

The line between meditation practice and day-to-day life is arbitrary, and this line becomes thinner as practice deepens. The challenge is to take the benefits of meditation into the mundane activities of our lives.

No matter what aspect of the path first calls you, the practice is ultimately one for waking up. It is not about doctrine or theology or self-improvement. Any reduction in suffering is worthwhile, even if it’s simply coming to a yoga class and feeling our way into stillness or becoming aware perhaps just once during the day of our breathing. But the larger task is awakening to causality—learning how our actions
always have consequences. One of the more significant insights I’ve had in my own practice over the years is that I’ve become much more aware of my intentions. Looking at my mind, day in and day out, from a place of stillness, has been instrumental in teaching me how I reinforce internalized patterns of suffering and how I can use awareness to make those constricted and chronic patterns more workable. Because I’ve struggled with depression since I was young, I’ve had no shortage of emotional weather patterns to contend with. Having a daily practice is key.

The practice of noticing the difference between pure awareness (puruṣa) and the fluctuating objects of consciousness is about allowing space in the heart, mind, and body so that we depart from habitual mental constructs and psychological delusions, not from thinking altogether but from conceiving in conceived and predisposed ways.

Yoga works against our most problematic conception of duality. It undoes the belief that we are truly separate from the world. Awakening is the ongoing process of lifting veils in the mind that separate things. It is a process of dissolving our sense of oppositions, like self and other. When we take wholesome action, and understand the habits that inform unwholesome action, we shift the heart into such a natural state of openness that we no longer see existence in the universe as separate from the self. Enlightenment is becoming who we really are, free to take action without feeling as though “my” actions benefit the “other.” So in this way it would be clearer to say “enlightening action.” Nobody gets enlightened. Instead we are continually waking up. We don’t practice for a future enlightenment; we practice as an expression of our innate awareness. When we find that our self is bound up in what is greater than the self, habits die away. Without the passing away of habit, the yoked nature of the present moment remains concealed. Irvin Yalom makes the point in psychological language:

To live in the present above time is to have no future, and to have no future is to accept death—yet this man cannot do.
He cannot accept death and therefore neither can he live in the Now; and not living in the Now, he lives not at all."

“Death” in this case is the death of habit—the ongoing letting go of the thoughts that keep us “concealed and wrapped” in our self-centered versions of reality. Any creation of a separate self is a defense against letting go, and it gives rise to the six poisons of duḥkha, the six enemies in the heart.