

## MASTERING SHAKTI by Shandor Remete

Shakti is the energy within the human system that is usually used up by the excesses of mundane existence – digesting food, repairing the tissues, and maintaining the balance of the bodily systems. It can also be wasted through activities like daydreaming and useless thinking. Yoga is designed to remove the excesses of habitual living in order to free this energy so that it can be directed towards a higher order of living. Every human being is endowed with this potential, but its presence is usually masked by the fluctuations of the conditioned mind. The mind only becomes aware of this power when it stops projecting, and attains a steady and concentrated state. The perfection of this state is the goal of yoga but, if there is to be a chance of success, beginners must be pointed in this direction right from the beginning of their study. The key lies in the right preparation .

My study of well known and little known styles of present-day yoga, as well as martial arts and the ancient katakali and bharatanatya dance forms of southern India, has revealed a striking similarity in the preparatory forms of all these disciplines. These forms are essential for the learning and unfolding of the inner power. Although they have been utilized in these disciplines over many ages, they are not found in the popular styles of modern yoga. This lack of preparation leaves the beginner susceptible to confusion, injury, and unfulfilled aspirations. The cultivation of power through all ages has always been achieved through simple and uncomplicated movements. The Shadow school is built upon this principle. The prelude forms of the Shadow school are not a new invention, but a resurrection of this age-old method of preparation.

Yoga deals practically with the process of enlightenment by teaching the individual to discriminate between opposites. The final goal of yoga is to differentiate the soul from everything that is not the soul. This process involves the skillful reduction of the fixed patterns within the individual that waste the life force. According to one of the forefathers of hatha yoga, Allama Prabhudeva: "The appearance of this body is nothing but layers of frozen shadows." These shadows are seven in number: the shadow of joy; the shadow of the intellect; the shadows of the mundane mind; the power principle; the gross structure; the luster of the skin; and the shadow on the ground. Each shadow is a blockage of light. By considering the list of shadows given here, one can see how different people are stuck on different planes. Some dissipate their energies looking for happiness, others in intellectual pursuits, and others chasing worldly power.

The *Shiva Svarodaya*, an ancient tantrika text on the life breath (*svara*), contains a short chapter titled "Yoga of the Shadow Man." It describes how to observe one's own shadow, and to recognize the many symptoms hidden within it. Verse 382 states: "If the shadow does not have any head, the man will die within a period of one month; if it does not have any thigh, he will die within eight days,

etc.” In chapter seven of the “Indriya sthana” section of the *Charaka Samhita*, the following interpretation of the shadow and luster is given: “If there is any deformity observed in body parts in the shadow of the person in moonlight, sunlight, the light of a lamp, water, or mirror, he should be considered a ghost.” These references reveal how the shadows can be used as diagnostic tools to ascertain where we are at any given moment. It should be borne in mind, however, that the shadows hidden in the deeper recesses require much closer observation.

It is because of this difficulty that the great hatha yoga sages felt it necessary to write so many books on this subject. These texts describe a complex path that must be undertaken in a disciplined, step-by-step progression. When they are followed in this way, there is a gradual unfolding of the innate subtle forces, together with the spiritual wisdom required to handle them. A successful practice therefore requires both theory and practice. The intellectual study of theory provides the background for a well-grounded and rewarding practice, and the linking of the two brings the awakening of the intuitive faculties. However, this linking is not just a question of bringing the mind and body together, and a lot of energy can be wasted in trying to force these two to unite. One has to find the right link for the union to bear fruit, a link that is described in the *Shiva Svarodaya*:

“When one masters this unique way of knowledge that is present in all bodies, one can reach all other forms of knowledge without any difficulty. It is through the study of the vital wind that you will be able to understand the cosmic law, the significance of the transcendent harmonies, the contents of the holy books, the nature of everything that is in the three worlds. The vital wind is the reflection of the atman, the universal soul. An interpretation of destiny from someone who does not possess the science of breath may be compared to a house without a master, a word without knowledge, or a body without a head.” (*Shiva Svarodaya*, vv. 15-17)

*Svara*, the word translated here as “vital wind,” can also be translated as “breath,” but the functions described relate to the movement of vital energy in the body, which is only partially revealed through the workings of the physical breath. Right from the beginning, students must thus devote themselves to gaining knowledge of the *svara*. The conscious exploration of the energetic world inside and outside the body provides the link between the mental and the physical, and between theory and practice.

The asanas, bandhas, mudras, and pranayamas are the yogi's tools for the craft of self-cultivation. The technical sections of the texts provide instructions for the correct use of these tools. The texts also provide an overview of the undertaking, and so act as a map for the journey. If you don't know where you are in the grand scheme of things, how can you decide what your next step should be? Whether one looks at this endeavor as a craft or as a journey, success depends on skillful

maneuvering.

We must be clear about the place of the asanas in this process. The word *asana* means “sitting or staying still,” but also refers to a mouth. When these two meanings are combined, it suggests that while secrets are imparted one should be seated and still. The *Yoga Sutras’* definition of asana as *sthira-sukham* (“steady and harmonious”) is often taken at face value, but in fact raises many questions. What should be steady? What should be harmonious? The power mechanism is of the nature of fire, and is located in the central channel, the sushumna. Until the breath is steadied by the removal of all energetic obstructions through the application of asana, kriya, bandha, pranayama, and mudra, the fire will waver and the light will be full of shadows devoid of power.

The bodily positions that are used for the removal of energetic obstructions are better described by the compound *kaya-samasthana-ghati-kriya*. *Kaya* refers to the body, *sama* means even or equal, *sthana* refers to placement or a stance, *ghati* is a standard unit of time of 24 minutes, and *kriya* means process. The full compound translates as, “a process undergone through a sequence of equalizing movements over a period of 24 minutes.” The term *ghati* is often used in the texts to refer to the duration of different forms of practice. It is defined as the length of time it takes for the energy to circulate once around the body. One *ghati* is also the duration of the ruling times of the elements earth and water within each hour of the day. These two facts are not coincidental. It has been said that the secret of good practice is knowing what to do, how much to do, and when to do it.

According to the hatha yoga texts, particularly the *Shiva Svarodaya*, for maximum benefit yogic practices should be carried out in accordance with the prevailing influx and ruling element of the *svara*. The current of the vital energy switches regularly and constantly between the left, right and central channels, and also between the five elements. Every hour the current switches between the ida and pingala, with a short intervening period of a few minutes in the central channel. During each hour the *svara* also switches between the five elements: air rules first, followed by fire, then earth, and finally water. The element ether circulates for no more than four minutes as the breath shifts from one influx to the other. The *Shiva Svarodaya* states that the practice of asanas, bandhas, and mudras should always be begun when the right influx is at work, and while the ruling element is the favorable earth or water. The student must train to become sensitive to these changes in the vital energy, and if possible to learn with a teacher who has this knowledge.

Working with the body in order to overcome energetic obstructions requires a living knowledge of the *svara* and skilful maneuvering or manipulation of the energetic body. The tools for this are provided by the system known as *marmasthana* (*varma-kalai* in Tamil). This system describes 108 vital junctions, or vulnerable points, within the body .

The word *marma* is derived from the verb root *mrt-*, which means “death.” Marmas were first observed to be vulnerable areas. Fear is the greatest cause of injuries in practice, though these junctions can also be damaged by falling, by being hit, by the way one carries oneself, and through the folding and unfolding of the body. These junctions have been utilized in kalaripayyat, the Indian martial art (in the science of striking and reviving), and in Ayurvedic therapy (in massage), but they also respond to different patterns of muscular use, movement, and breathing. According to yoga, each marma relates to specific vayus (the different pranas), specific doshas (humors), dhatus (tissues), and srotases (channels).

Correct activation of these marmas enhances all these functions, while incorrect activation will damage them. For example, the junctions in the wrists, ankles, and neck govern the tendons and connective tissue throughout the body, and are therefore responsible for flexibility. Failure to activate these junctions correctly, often results in injury to other joints and tissues. The marmasthana information makes it clear that the appropriate use of the lower and upper legs increases circulation, space, and support for the joints. Incorrect use decreases these, which can eventually result in injury, both to joints (most commonly the knees) and to the organs that correspond to those joints (in the case of the knees: the liver, spleen, and heart). The descriptions of the marmas and their associations give many clues to how these areas should be worked, both on the muscular and the energetic levels.

This system was devised and developed by the great South Indian sage, Agastya, and is highly recommended by two ancient texts, the *Yogayajnavalkya Samhita* and the *Vashishta Samhita* (or the *Yoga Kanda* of Vashishta). At the beginning of the chapter on meditation (dhyana), Yajnavalkya states: “Only after understanding the marmasthana, the junction of nadi, and the location of vayu, must one proceed with the understanding of atma.” (*Yogayajnavalkya Samhita*, IX.4)

The marmas of this system should not be confused with the points of Chinese acupuncture, although many parallels may be found in the two systems. Twelve of the 108 marma junctions are said to be of vital importance, while the other 96 are termed medial life junctions. The 12 major life centers are situated between the center of the perineal floor (yonisthana) and the crown of the head (adhipati). They include the seven chakras, and are responsible for the movement of the life force through the four central channels: ida, pingala, sushumna, and alambusha (the tongue channel). During inhalation, the life force moves clockwise downwards in the operating channel (ida or pingala), and during exhalation counterclockwise upwards in the central channel. These 12 vital junctions and the four central nadis (channels) are in charge of the skeletal structure with all its joints, as well as the heating mechanism which is responsible for the production of inner light.

The 96 medial life junctions are peripheral; 32 govern the nerves and soft tissues, while 64 directly affect the blood and blood vessels. The 96 peripheral junctions are in charge of the eight nadis (channels) that carry the life force through the peripheral areas and feed into the central channels. These eight channels are: two from the eyes to the corresponding big toes; two from the ears to the corresponding big toes; the channel from the throat to the head of the genitals; the channel from the neck to the anus; and the two belt channels, one from left to right, the other from right to left. When good peripheral activity is achieved, then these channels are cleared, and the energy flows through them without obstruction. This energy then feeds into the central channels.

As long as the wrists and ankles remain blocked, all the joints remain stiff and susceptible to damage. For this reason, the obstructions in the peripheral body must first be addressed. This is achieved through the warrior movements of the prelude forms, where correct positioning and movement of the legs, combined with skillful arm work, frees the peripheral junctions. When this is achieved so that the energy of the peripheral channels can feed into the central channel, the linear movements of the sun forms (surya namaskars) are used to increase the power of the central intelligence. It can take anything from three to seven years to master these two stages.

Many injuries occur among yoga practitioners because the correct, step-by-step procedure (vinyasa krama) is not followed. Greed often leads to the premature “forcing” of asanas like padmasana, sarvangasana, and sirsasana. Forcing the inversions leads to neck injuries, poor kidney function, and displacement of the abdominal organs. When physical effort is made in response to the energy system, there is knowledge and confidence; without this communication, the student resorts to blind muscular force driven by greed and insecurity. Application of the marmasthana removes these fears from the mind and the body. When the system of marma is well learnt anatomically and energetically, one is able to cultivate a stable and progressive yoga practice.

Nadi shodana, the “clearing of the channels,” is a much misunderstood subject. The blockage of the channels is inextricably bound up with mental distortions. When the energy of the arms is obstructed, it gives rise to greed. Energy obstructed in the legs leads to sexual and food-related desires. For the clearing of the channels to be effective, the mental habits that pollute them must also be uprooted. When *kaya-samasthana-ghati-kriya* is carried out effectively, then as the energetic obstructions are cleared the mental conditioning also breaks down. This is most important, because the obstructions that stop the energy from entering the central channel prevent the mind from turning inwards, and cause it constantly to project its dissatisfactions outside. When the *svara* flows freely the heart is pure, desires cease, and the mind becomes quiescent. Then consciousness rests in its own form.

