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On the Philosophical Dimensions of âsanâ

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The talk I wish to give this evening is on the philosophy of âsanâ. In order to avoid a possible misunderstanding I wish to first explain what I mean by «philosophical dimensions of âsanâ ». I will do this through a critical discussion of different misinterpretations of the relation between âsanâ and philosophy. Then I shall explain as briefly as possible in which sense I use the term philosophy here. I hope that this will help you to see more clearly the relation of philosophy and the practise of Asana. After these more or less preliminary remarks I shall turn to the main subject and treat some of the philosophical dimensions of âsanâ at some length. There are different possibilities to discuss in a philosophical manner the meaning of âsanâ. For instance one could try to relate them to the concepts of the old Indian Yoga-philosophy. A good example for this approach is Guruji's "Tree of Yoga". For today I chose another way. I shall discuss the practise of âsanâ more by means of contemporary philosophy although the voice of the old eastern and western tradition will be present too. In order to understand the deepness of âsanâ a philosophy of the body is required. Therefore I shall try to first outline some fundamentals of a philosophical approach to the body and afterwards I wish to discuss three basic dimensions of âsanâ, namely their relation to the spatiality, the temporality and the rootedness of human existence.

Three views about the relation of âsanâ and philosophy

For the past few years I have been teaching philosophy at various Yoga centers and teacher training programmes and thereby I have had the opportunity of sharing in many discussions about the meaning of Asana in the light of Yoga-philosophy. In the conversations many inspiring insights were brought up, but also some typical misconceptions of the relation between philosophy and âsana, which disturbed me, although each had some truth to it.

Many people told me that the physical exercises of Yoga which are known as Asanas differ from western gymnastics and sports because Yoga has a philosophical background. Yoga is not just physical, they said, because it also has a philosophical side to it. âsanâ for the body, Yoga-philosophy and meditation for the mind. This is often considered to be the holistic approach of Yoga. But is this a way of thinking, which is truly in accordance with the unity of human nature? Obviously not. The separation of body and mind is just being repeated instead of being overcome. If one looks closer at the practise of people, which defend this philosophical view one finds that they are in danger of treating the âsanâs as a mere physical thing and, on the other hand, they have ideas in their heads like: I'm not just doing physical exercises because the Yoga-philosophy tells me that Yoga may help me to

attain enlightenment, to unite with god and experience samâdhi. So I'm far more than an athlete, I'm a mystic, a Yogi.

Although it is true that the traditional Yoga-philosophy deals with what one could call a mystical experience, union with god or samâdhi, it is easy to see that in the above case of dualistic thinking the so called Yoga-philosophy has only an ideological function. Insofar as it is not based on real bodily experience it's just inflating the Ego of the practitioner with phantasies.

Another type of yoga-practioners, which I call the Puritans, react critically to the above way of understanding the relation between philosophy and âsanâ. They say: Let's be humble. The union with god, samâdhi, and so on are goals beyond our reach. For ordinary people like us, who are not holy men or women, Yoga- philosophy is first of all yama and niyama, or what we call morals. The discipline of the body must be complemented by a discipline of the whole human conduct.

As you all know there is always a respectable amount of competition, rivalry, ambition and intrigues between us and it is especially so among the Iyengar-Yoga people. Besides the many benefits that Iyengar Yoga brings it is maybe the most effectful promoter of a capitalistic attitude towards Yoga on the European Yoga scene and all the capitalistic vices and virtues are flourishing among us (not only rivalry but also emphasis on efficiency, industry and smartness)

Some think that to tame these energies and to stay on more or less friendly terms with each other strong ethics are useful and the philosopher is needed as a moralizer.

This is partly true because, indeed, ethics are a part of the philosophy of Yoga. But in this case too, when philosophy is understood in a very restricted sense as practical philosophy or morals only, the difficulty of reconciling it with the practise of Asana remains. One thing is for sure: Whenever ethic committees tend to become a necessity the source is already lost. As long as the moral discipline has no reasonable foundation in our concrete Yoga-experience and moral behaviour is not understood as a flower which grows quite naturally from the serious practise of Yoga, yama and niyama are only added to from outside and have the same ideological character as the mystifying version of Yoga-philosophy. Usually a two-faced behaviour is the effect. Yama and niyama tend to become mere lip service.

A third sort of persons, which one could call the pragmatists, see through the obscuring role that philosophy as mystifying ideology and as mere moralism plays. They say: «Let's forget about philosophy altogether. Iyengar-Yoga is an absolutely perfect way of stretching. It offers much more detailed knowledge and accuracy than comparable methods. It is good for our health. We feel well after practising it and mastering the difficult poses even satisfies our ambition. That's all! There is no philosophy required to learn the technique. So why should we bother with Yoga-philosophy? The only thing that is required is plain practise without any philosophical background or moralistic superstructure.»

The truth of this view is its sobriety and its restriction to experience. Its danger: outside perfection without inner deepness. The error: that salvation, liberation can be gained by technique alone. This is

sometimes the attitude of the ambitious Yoga Yuppies, the young upwardly mobile Yoga professionals.

Thesis: âsanâs have a philosophical quality

All three views about the relation between philosophy and âsanâ that I mentioned have one thing in common: They consider philosophy to be something which must be externally added to âsanâ. As opposed to them, I want to emphasize that philosophy is not something which primarily doesn't belong to the practise of Asana. I want to maintain the thesis that the âsanâs as such and within themselves do have a philosophical quality. The philosophy which already happens in a pre-reflective way in the practise of Asana, the philosophy within âsanâ, is the basis of a philosophy on âsanâ, which tries to explain the experience of Asana systematically with the means provided by philosophical methods. A really deep and reasonable practise of Asana is a way of philosophizing. Philosophy on âsanâ is therefore not necessary plain theory which somebody conceives at the writing table but can be based on the philosophy within âsanâ which happens deep within the heart of the pose and enlightens the whole practise.

To illustrate what I mean I want to remind you of one of Guruji's remarks that you can find in the reader "Iyengar. His life and work". There he says: "When I practise, I'm a philosopher. When I teach I'm a scientist. When I demonstrate I'm an artist."(32) How can he claim to be a philosopher when practising Yoga? Has anybody ever seen him reading books on Yogaphilosophy when he is in shîrshâsana or in any other pose? I haven't. Well, somebody could say: He has been practising these poses for more than fifty years. Maybe sometimes he gets a bit bored by them and then probably his mind starts wandering and he entertains himself with philosophical speculations.

I don't think that he means this. Rather he seems to say that when he is practising in a right way and that means with awareness and in unity with the pose - then he is a philosopher. Why? When after all is somebody a philosopher?

What is philosophy?

In order to understand how someone can be a philosopher whilst practising âsanâ, we first have to realize that a philosopher is not primarily somebody who has a system of ideas in his mind which one can learn by heart or write down in a textbook. The philosophy that makes the philosopher is only real when he or she philosophizes. Like music philosophy is not an object, not something which is simply present at hand like, for instance, the passport, which you have in your pocket ready to be shown to everyone. Music only becomes alive in the act of playing. Likewise philosophy lives in philosophizing. Philosophy is an event which, like music, at times happens in our midst, a realization of being which, again like music, involves the whole person and not just the brain. One cannot understand it by just reading about it and inform oneself about the different theories of the

philosophers: «This is what Plato wrote and this is the interesting view of Shankara; and next Sunday maybe I shall read what Lao-tse said and so on. » That's not the way to experience philosophy from within. What was on the mind of the great thinkers only becomes clear if you yourself join the dance of thought and thus participate in the effort to live within the clearance of truth.

Philosophizing one could define as caring about the truth of Being in its totality and in regard of its source or origin.

This is not an arbitrary leisure time activity, a hobby which helps us to kill time. Philosophizing is something which happens in the very core of human existence. It belongs to the nature of man as Plato says in his famous dialogue Phaedrus: «*φύσει γὰρ, ὡς φίλε, ἐπιτετιχέναι τὴν φιλοσοφίαν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ διανοίῃ*» ("For by nature, my friend, man's mind dwells in philosophy", Phaedrus, 279a). And exactly because philosophizing is a part of the nature of man it's not only one of the highest human possibilities, it's actually a necessity for every human being.

Of course our true nature is well hidden and we are very often not in touch with it. Accordingly on the surface of our daily life philosophizing doesn't occur. It is there, but it is well hidden. It sleeps. "Normally, man does not feel in the mood to ask for the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole. As long as our attention is absorbed by the active realization of purposes, we are not in the mood to consider philosophically the whole of existence. ... There is needed, ever since, a shock, a violent push, a concussion of the normal average attitude towards the world and life - so that philosophizing .. may be put into motion at all." (Pieper, *The Condition of Philosophy today*, in D.W. Hudson (Ed.), *The Future of Thomism*, Notre Dame, Indiana 1992, 26)

It may be the experience of death, or the beginning of a great love, the turning point of a healing process within psychotherapy, or the experience of the overwhelming beauty of a landscape which strikes us in such a way that our preoccupation with the necessities and needs of daily life are all of a sudden relativised or even forgotten and the whole of existence comes into the picture. In such moments philosophizing awakens and we become aware of our openness and relatedness to the mystery which the Upanisads call *sarvam* or *sarvaloka*, the whole world, the entirety of whatever is. We rediscover the old truth which St. Thomas meant when he said *anima est quodammodo omnia* ("The soul is in a certain way everything" *De ver. I, 1* according to Aristotle, *ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ ὅλα οὐκ ἐστὶν ἐστὶ παντα*, *De anima III, 8, 431b 21*)

Whenever we find ourselves standing in this openness of the entirety of Being in which everything astonishingly appears out of nothing the great old questions arise, the Upanisadic questions, which, for example, form the powerful opening of the *svetâsvatâra* Upanisad: "What is the origin? Whence are we born? By what do we live? And on what are we established?" With these questions philosophy starts, like Plato says, as a voyage in search for the origin, the Upanisadic Brahman, or to speak with Aristotle the *ἀρχὴ παντὸς* (Arist. *Met. A 3, 983-984b*), the source of everything.

Of course it is not everybody's task to dedicate her or himself completely to the development of the basic philosophical questions and to interpret and discuss the philosophical experience with the refined methods of academic philosophy, which has to take into consideration also the history of philosophical thought. But nevertheless philosophizing is a fundamental constituent of human existence and it happens within every life which deserves the name human. It is the duty of the academic philosophers to bring more light into the process of philosophizing which happens within the heart of every human being.

Does the philosophical search for the essence and metaphysical cause of all beings have anything to do with Yoga? Of course it does. It is not by accident that the same svetasvatara which starts with those great philosophical questions gives us in the second chapter the oldest detailed and methodical explanation of the practise of Yoga. As I already said, the philosophical effort to contemplate the entirety and the totality of the world and existence in order to experience the ultimate meaning of the whole requires a special condition of the mind. To realize the wholeness and unity of reality an unbiased openness is necessary. One has to give up clinging to this or that special entity. A renunciation of any pretension has to take place so that the soul is entirely filled with listening silence. I mentioned above that certain surprises or concussions can throw us into such a philosophical state of mind. But one can also train the required awareness through a cultivation of the body/mind by certain spiritual exercises which in India are known as Yoga.

Philosophizing in âsanâ

As you all know the practise of âsanâ is one of the forms of exercise that has been developed in the history of Yoga. In order to understand the function that Asanas may have for an approach to the philosophical dimension of human life we first have to look in a philosophical manner at the body and the meaning the body has for the experience of Being as a whole. Only if the mystery of the body is understood in a proper way we can we hope to put the practise of âsanâ in its true light.

The lived body and its intelligence

For this purpose let us try to go back to our Being-here and recollect on the experience of being present. How do we experience ourselves here and now? How does the phenomenon of the body as such reveal itself, how is it given to us? We are bodily present in the world and also being bodily related to the things that occur within the already opened span of the world.

To exist bodily means to sustain and maintain and that is to embody the vastness of a worldspanning realm of perception, to hold open this realm into which whatever can be shines forth and can be perceived in its meaning and its place. We exist bodily as a spanning, bearing and holding open of a realm of perception, that is responsive to the presence of whatever phenomena reveal themselves in it.

The body as openness towards the world is primarily not present as an externally perceived object. We don't have the body as an external object, but we live embodying ourselves. And only on the basis of the lived body, the body that we live, we are partly able to place between ourselves and the body the distance that is necessary to objectify it. Whereas the different sciences, especially the medical sciences, chemistry and physics, deal with the objectified body the philosophical investigation of the body starts from the lived body and interprets the way it reveals itself in our selfexperience.

According to this approach the body is essentially the embodiment of the Self. E.g. if we shake hands it's me that you touch and at the same time I'm touching you, I myself and you yourself, we touch each other. And to say it more precise: We don't simply touch each other. We reach out, open ourselves and receive our own welcome in the hand of the other. So we, our Selves, meet, and not just two hands. The lived body is the way I embody myself as a person which lives within the universe, opened to Being as a whole. The lived body thus is a personal body and if you shook somebody's hand you can say afterwards that you met her or him personally. There is no duality between body and mind insofar as we are personally living the body; only when we are looking at the body as an external, corporeal thing, -a point of view which is not in accordance with its essence- then the problem of body and mind relationship may arise. But if you look closer at what is happening you may find that it is never a mind without a body that objectifies the body, it is always the living body that objectifies parts of itself.

Every part of the body belongs to our personal human and thus spiritual being in the world and is, therefore, determined by our different modes of reference to that which appears and shows itself. For example a hand as a human hand never is a mere corporeal thing and its craft is even infinitely richer than the craft of the grasping organs that animals have. The human hand exists as embodiment of handling relations within the openness of a world like laying one's hand on something, gripping something, lending a hand, holding someone by the hand, folding the hands to reconcile oneself to the great oneness. So you see that the parts of the body, the different organs are embodiments of different relations to whatever occurs in the realm of perception that we are. We don't see because we have eyes, but we have eyes because we can see. The ability, the power to see embodies itself as eyes. Or like St. Thomas said: *partes corporis sunt propter partes animi*, the parts of the body are for the sake of the parts of the soul. Therefore the body constitutes itself within the process of embodiment.

Our ex-sistence in the world, which exposes us to the manifestation of Being in its totality, this openness, which usually is considered to be the nature of the human mind only, is in the first place a matter of our lived body.

A simple example: Remember when you came in here and sat down. Did you have to think about how to sit down? Your lived body knew already what to do and sat down before your consciousness measured the distance between your buttocks and the chair, before your will had the opportunity to direct the movement and before you "saw" reflectively yourself making contact with the chair.

There is a pre-reflective body-intelligence which spontaneously understands more or less the circumstances before the thinking mind passes its judgement. Prior to all conscious cognition and volition, the world and our being in the world is disclosed to us by our lived body.

To speak with Friedrich Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "Der Leib ist eine große Vernunft" (The body is a great reason). The lived body's Self thinks before the little I with its little reason emerges and starts to give its commentary on a situation which the bodily Self has already disclosed. Therefore the intelligence of the living body is prior to the intelligence of the calculating Ego.

To understand the intelligent openness of the lived body better we have to distinguish between the lived body's intentionality or directionality and the lived body's transcendence. The body's intentionality is the power to focus on special entities within the world, like seeing the chair, moving towards it and sitting down. Seeing something, moving towards something, sitting on it: these are different modes of the lived body to intend things. These possibilities of focussing on this or that within our world are based on the more fundamental experience that I am, and that means that I'm bodily present as worldspanning awareness. One can call this awareness the lived-body's transcendence. The body's transcendence doesn't intend something particular within the world, but is an opening towards the primordial region of Being as a whole which is the necessary precondition for every intentional relation to the multitude of beings.

The body's intentionality and the body's transcendence are in reality never separated from each other. The way in which we look and listen, sit and stand and walk, every posture and gesture all our bodily behaviour is not only the embodiment of different kinds of behaviour towards special entities but is always also an answer to the basic openness, the vastness of Being as a whole in which we find ourselves.

My thesis is that the practise of Asanas especially deals with the lived-body's transcendence. In Asana we don't open ourselves to intend this or that, Asana is a bodily opening towards the wholeness of the world we live in. Thus the practise of Asana means a cultivation of the lived body's pre-reflective, pre-conscious attunement to the openness of Being as a whole.

That which always is presupposed for our intentional behaviour and which in daily life forms the inconspicuous background, now becomes thematic: The lived body's openness to the whole universe, its unity and its hidden source, how the body is attuned to the supporting ground of the earth and the vastness that surrounds us.

Everything spatial and temporal, all space-time occurs essentially within this primordial vastness, the open region which gives space, time and ground for everything be it present or absent. This usually hidden region shines forth and enlightens us through the practise of Asana.

The next step which I want to take is to analyze the attunement to the openness of Being which happens in the practise of āsanā by looking at the spaciality, temporality and rootedness of our lived body and how they are attuned to an appropriate answer on the space- time- and groundgiving call of the open vastness of Being.

The Spaciality of the lived body and its attunement through âsanâ

Only the objectified body has a definitely delineated shape. The lived body is not a closed-up entity, like a stone. It has a directionality to its environment or ambience. The personal body is essentially an openness towards the living ambience. The openness of the body doesn't end at the layer of skin, but has even a cosmological dimension. As M. Boss points out: "When I direct someone towards a windowsill with a gesture of my right hand, my bodily existence as a human being doesn't end at the tip of my index finger. While perceiving the windowsill ...I extend myself bodily far beyond this fingertip to that windowsill. In fact, bodily I reach out even further than this to touch all the phenomena of my world, present or merely visualized represented ones. ... " We are not the same way in space as our trousers are inside the wardrobe. We are never here only as this encapsulated body. We are always here and already there too. This means we pervade the space. So we are not just appearing at a certain place in space like all inanimated things. To have space belongs to our nature. Spaciality is a part of our being. It belongs to our embodiment that we project and so in a way create space according to our relation to Being as a whole. We are structuring the space in which we are bodily living. By projecting space we place in the presence of ourselves in the world and also give space to all the other beings.

As I already said, âsanâs are not intentional actions which span the distance in order to reach a special entity. To practise asana means to stop for a while the daily life activities in which our intentional attention is directed to the different things that occur within the openness of our world.

The break is obvious. You stop moving around from one place to the other doing this and that. Instead of this you just stand, or sit, or ly there and take the time to notice the basic attitude of the body. You stay where you are, listen to how you are where you are and start to cultivate the way you take your abode within the world right at the place you're actually in. The direction of the cultivation is an improvement of the lived body's transcendence, an attunement to the silent sound of the world.

Whereas in the intentional movements of daily life we are always moving from one place to the other, in âsanâ we are not moving through space. We stay at one place and open from that place the space all around by extending our bodily being into the various possible directions, and, thereby, remove the obstacles that narrow our spatiality.

E.g. when we stretch out our arms in vîrabhadrâsana (1) it is not because we want to pick some fruits which are hanging high above us or something like that. The extension of the arms happens for the sake of opening the whole direction. The aim of the stretch is not something within space but space itself, the extension of our motility field. We are pervading the space above us. Are we free to enter this dimension of space so that we can reach into the height without hindrance? Or are some stiff joints narrowing our field of motility in this direction and hinder us to embody the space above us? Thus Asanas are an extension of our field of motility, which is the designing and gathering of the field of Being (A thought which is carried out in David Michael Levin's interesting book "The body's recollection of Being", Routledge and Kegan, London 1985) The way the vastness of Being manifests

itself in relation to the space created by our motility, this way is developed, enriched and extended by Asana.

Usually the field of our motility is structured as a more or less egologically constituted space. In terms of Indian philosophy the ahamkâra, the I-maker, rules over the spatiality of our being. He projects and creates a space around us which is determined by a dualistic fixation, caused by anxiety and selfdefense. This space is separated into two parts: the first is my wellprotected space with me as the absolute center, the second is the alien space of the others. Inbetween the two spaces there is a imaginery wall. The ahamkâra is projecting a narrowness which produces a feeling of false security, because one can more or less controll and sustain it by routinized and more or less stereotype movements. We don't allow others to enter this habit-space to open it up and widen it by their own spaciality. We don't give space to others; we just want to expand the space over which we reign.

If we do them correctly âsanâs help to remove the defense mechanisms that narrow our spaciality. The manner in which we apprehend the world undergoes a modification. The entire body turns into an affective sensorium with no limits to its lived space. One can feel a spatial spread and permeation, which also means a transformation of our affectivity. To project an open space in which everything is able to show itself just like it is, this is nothing else then the spatial aspect of compassion. As we develop the ability of giving space to whatever appears within the range of our worldspanning attention, the distant things come nearer, we feel with them and share their being. So they are no longer alien. We give them the space that enables their essence to shine forth and as the essence of everything begins to speak to us we begin to realize that everything in our world speaks the same language then we. There is an inter-resonance, an attunement between us and the world. One vital breath, one prâna is gathering all beings in non-duality.

Through Asana we are bodily reconnected to the vastness of Being as a whole and are called upon to reach across the farest distance, span it and so give space to everything that appears. The bodily readiness for this worldspanning spatiality is the tonus of the body. If we are depressiv, we don't expect anything from the world and turn away from Being. Our body collapses. We loose our tonus. On the other hand if we are bodily well toned we feel a oneness with Being as a whole we are ready to face the tasks which are waiting for us. The world is luminous and we feel an opening around us.

The creation of a non-egological spatiality by the bodily extension and the optimizing of the tonus in Asana is therefore also a possible, experimental basis of ethics and it also may lead to the religious dimension of Yoga because the communion of all things within our open spatiality is the realm where we may become aware of the divine as an all-pervading presence .

The temporality of the lived body and its gathering through the practise of âsanâ.

You all know the following situation: you come to a Yoga class, you've been in a hurry, you are out of breath and exhausted. Time seems to pass very quickly. You hardly can follow its rapidity. Two hours later, after the class the situation has changed completely. You are calm now, there is no hurry. you feel refreshed and in relation to time this means you have a lot of time again and the time you have now is like a stream which moves with a broad and steady flow. Time doesn't run away like before. Now you are carried by it. The stream of time is one stream which connects your time and the time of everything that happens within your world. Whereas before the class you cursed the tramway because you had to wait for it, now you wait again for the same tram to arrive but even if you have an appointment and you must arrive punctually, you're not impatient now, because there is a stillness within your heart. The Calmness you experience now is a mood which attunes you to the course of time. You are able to follow the natural rhythm of events. Everything has its own time and you can devote to things the time they need. The time that through the practise of Asana we learn to give ourselves creates a calmness which also enables us to give time to others.

This experience shows us that practising âsanâs transforms our perception of time, or more precise it transforms the way we are our time. Why is this so?

Our bodily being is not just a being which creates its own spatiality by projecting space around itself in different ways. As embodied persons we also extend ourselves in various ways into the dimensions of time. Our being reaches out into present, future and past. We are our present, past and future. And we are not only within the modes of time. We have the freedom to perceive and shape our being in time.

And just because we are free to form our being in time there are also a lot of possibilities for us to escape from taking the responsibility for the time which is given to us and loose our Self by living in conflict with the time, which we are.

I want to discuss only one case: The nervousness and restlessness which I already mentioned above. Impatience and restlessness are expressions of the desire to leave the present behind. They are an example for our incapability of attending to what is happening here and now, because we have the feeling that it is not interesting enough or on the contrary it's overcharging us, in any case we feel that present gives us no fullfillment. This frustration motivates us to escape from our present. So we are wishing to be already with that which we expect to happen in the future, which we hope will be better, or we escape from the present by dreaming about an idealized past.

If we look deeper we again meet the functioning of the ahamkâra. How does a person who wants to be the center of the world and tries to make her or himself completely sure of her's or his' being act on time? Usually she or he wants to possess it. The transitoriness of all things is a threat. Time itself is threatening to the ego because if you want to be sure of time, if you want to hold and possess it is like water that you want to grip. You only find that it runs through your fingers as an uninterrupted sequence of fugitive "nows". Every "now" comes from the "now-not-yet" and immediately disappears into the "now-no-longer". The Ego's desire to survive encourages it to defend its life against this

transitoriness. So it creates phantasies about a paradise in the past or in the future. Or it tries to win present time by doing more and more. It wishes to feel the pulse of life and jumps from one excitement to the other. But the more we try to gain time, the less time we have because we lose the ability to let ourselves be.

The practise of âsanâ is an attunement to another relation to time. We learn to stay at our present and not to run away. The extension of the body doesn't only widen our spaciality, it also has a temporal aspect. It widens our temporality. Extension is an opening of our presence towards the future, which enables us to receive the time of our life as a gift, and thus dwell within the present without the fear of losing something.

With the precision the firmness of the pose increases. The shakiness disappears and the more the fluctuations of the body are calming down also our mind becomes calm and feels the richness of Being, which lies hidden in every moment. The experience of time changes. We feel the extension of time and realize that present is more than a fugitive now. The whole past and future is present in each moment. The fugitiveness of the isolated moments changes into a constant, steady flow of new life. We can receive this flow insofar as we are fully aware and united with ourselves in the pose. As long as we are able to remain undisturbed and silent within the âsanâ the chronological time, the time we measure through watches is vanished.

And it is possible to stay in this timeless time even if we change from one pose to the other and from practising to daily life. As long as it is not the ahamkâra which ends the pose by saying "I have enough" but we are in the true rhythm of activity and rest, through which the timespanning calmness is maintained. Learning to go to the maximum effort also enables us to let go of the effort and relax. It is not just a matter of changing from one pose to the other. Every pose has an internal rhythm of effort and release which we have to rediscover everyday because it is never exactly the same. This attunement to the rhythmic temporality which matches our bodily condition is necessary if we wish to drink the nectar of timeless time.

On the basis of the temporal attunement it is possible to dwell more or less within the timeless time even in daily life, because it enables us to join the rhythms of the environment, simply responding to the task that has to be performed in accordance with the demand of the current situation. One could call this an actional or active non-duality, which neither acts too soon nor too late, too quickly nor too slowly, but with a recollected decisiveness which is based on a deep felt unity with whatever is called forth into the openness of Being.

Beyond this ethical dimension the temporality which is developed by âsanâ has a religious meaning. It gives a presentiment of what eternity could mean - Not a mere negation of time, but the source and absolute fulfilment of being in time, the unity where there is complete oneness between past, present and future. The more we are able to unite our temporal existence by increasing our bodily awareness, the more we participate in this quality of time.

Rootedness

The last point that I want to mention could also have come first. But as you might have noticed in the preceding parts of this lecture when I treated the spatiality and temporality of our bodily being in relation to *âsanâ*, I wasn't really speaking about different things. I always spoke about one experience that has many different sides. But as I cannot talk about all aspects at once, I have to proceed point by point. Now I come to the last dimension, which I wish to speak about this evening. Like the others it contains the whole subject: I mean the aspect of rootedness or grounding.

One could try to define *âsanâ* as the perfection of the extension of the lived body. Every correct extension has two directions which should both be cultivated in every *âsanâ*. You always experience an eccentric and a concentric tendency, whenever you extend yourself. This is why Guruji speaks about *âsanâ* as a process of posing and reposing through which the evolutionary and the involutory movement both are balanced. The evolutionary aspect I emphasised when I spoke about spatiality. Evolution means a movement from the center to the periphery, which is a creation of space if it is done in a proper way. The cultivation of the embodiment of our spatiality gives us the experience of openness and sharpens our sense of direction. But that's not all. If the opening extension is correct it always and already implies the reversed tendency, which one could call involution. Involution is a flow from the vastness towards the center or source of extension, which is hidden in the depth of the body. And it is also a movement of centering down that pulls the practitioner down to earth, that connects her or him with the depth of the supporting earth.

The openness of the lived body not only reaches out across the dimension of vastness, but it also recedes into the dimension of depth and concealment, into secrecy and hiddenness. As the great french philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty writes the lived body is not just our being towards the world, which discloses the world to us, at the same time it is "notre ancrage dans un monde" our anchoring in the world. To anchor a ship means to set it in a fixed position in order to avoid its uncontrolled drifting, which would lead to a disorientation that would make it impossible to reach the destination. The ship's position becomes fixed by sending the anchor through the depth of the sea into the hidden bottom. To hold the ship in place the anchor has to sink with its whole weight into the ground.

In a very similar way the rooting or anchoring of our bodily existence takes place.

With our sense of gravity we feel our weight and reach out into the depth of the supporting ground. This gives orientation and balance. The uncontrolled drifting stops. The confusion decreases and we start to know ourselves and our place in the world.

The *ahamkâra*, the Ego doesn't trust anybody other than itself to support and carry its existence and, therefore, it doesn't release the weight of the body and give it to the earth. The result is that we try to hold ourself upright from the upper parts of the body, the chest and the head. Through *Asana* we learn to let loose there, to rediscover the true center of gravity and to grow down into the ground in order to grow up with the full support of the earth.

Guruji compares this two-fold movement with the growth of a tree: "In practising *âsanâs*, you feel the energy flowing in your system.", he says, " You feel how it is working, how it is flowing. In the tree,

the energy flows from the seed to the leaves, and as the leaves make contact with the air they feed energy back on a reverse journey through the branches and the stem to the root, and the root makes the tree grow further to produce the blossoms, fruits and flowers." The tree is a very good example of how the process of opening oneself and becoming visible in one's true stature is always accompanied by a secret movement of the hidden roots into the depth of the ground.

Only insofar as we ground ourselves in each âsanâ the movement of extension is not an extension of the Ego which shows off and enjoys itself by feeling its increasing strength and effort. The grounding of the pose provides release and a special sort of easiness within the effort. It's the same easiness that happens when one lets go of one's egocentrism. You let yourself be supported by the earth and so you don't need to waste your energy by trying to hold yourself upright by your willpower alone.

Ofcourse centeredness and grounding are related to the dimension of openness. Only by being well centered can we encounter other beings in a relaxed, opened and receptive way. A life without a center of balance is too insecure and vulnerable to tolerate that measure of openness. When we succeed in grounding ourselves we can start to let beings be with no necessity of clinging to others because we are afraid of losing their support. To be grounded means to be able to stand on your own feet.

And also the calmness which indicates our temporal attunement to the flow of time can only be attained through the process of grounding. As Donna Holleman says: «By sinking the whole body into its true center of gravity, we immediately feel that body and mind are centered - not oscillating, but stable. Sinking doesn't mean collapsing. The spine remains straight, negating the pull of gravity, but the restlessness of the body is stilled.» (Centering Down, 15)

In regard to our moral life the practise of grounding means the practise of humility. The word humility has as its root the latin "humus" which means earth. Humility means realizing our belongingness to the earth. We can come down to earth only if we overcome our arrogance and pride. In shifting the center of our embodiment downwards towards the earth we dissolve the ego-logical structure of existence to reunite ourselves with the earth. In relation to the ground on which we all are standing, there is nobody below and nobody above us; we are all of the same size. So the earth teaches us equality. The better one masters the âsanâs the deeper the grounding experience becomes and so too the sense of equality.

The religious aspect of the experience of rootedness is indicated by Guruji when he says: «Mastery over it [the âsanâs] takes place after uninterrupted practise which leads to the cessation of efforts. By such a mastery in posture, the mind is absorbed in Lord Ananta, who, according to myth, holds the globe of the earth steadily on His hood. The aspirant, too, yearns for such unwavering steadiness.» (Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, 51) The bodily experience of the ground that holds us up and gives us stability opens the door for the awareness of the infinite supreme Being that holds and supports the earth and all earthly beings.

Summary

To come to an end, let me summarize the result of our philosophical investigation:

To practise Asana means to practise our true bodily existence as human beings. This means to work ourselves through the blocks and hindrances, the kleshas which inhibit our essence from shining forth. The well understood practise of âsanâ promotes a liberation from the wrong attitudes that are caused by the ahamkâra which distorts our bodily being. âsanâs thus can help us to live in truth, in the unconcealment of Being. The unconcealment of Being shows itself and is bodily experienced through the Asanas as vast openness, happening in the unity of the dimensions of time and as a supporting ground which holds upright everything that is. By practising âsanâ we learn to respond to the vastness of Being by opening ourselves, gathering ourselves within a present that embraces past and future and by trustful rooting ourselves in the depth of Being.

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Some books that helped me to understand the philosophical dimensions of âsanâ:

Donna Holleman, *Centering Down*, Firenze 1981.

B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga*, Boston: Shambala 1989.

David Michael Lewin, *The Body's Recollection of Being. Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism*, London: Routledge and Kegan 1985.

Shigenori Nagatomo, *Attunement through the Body*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1992.

Yuasa Yasuo, *The Body. Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1987.