

INTRODUCTION TO ISHTA YOGA

WITH ALAN FINGER

Just as everyone has their own fingerprint, each individual has their own energetic and karmic fingerprint. The tools of ISHTA yoga help the individual understand that fingerprint - the essence of who they are - and then helps them find the practice that will aid them to live their best and most balanced life.

THE HISTORY OF ISHTA YOGA.

Yogiraj Alan Finger grew up in South Africa under the tutelage of his father, Kavi Yogaswarananda Mani Finger, and the teachings of many of the preeminent yogis of the 20th century, who visited South Africa regularly from India. First initiated by Paramahansa Yogananda in Los Angeles and later studying with Sivananda in India, Mani Finger transformed his home into an ashram which was graced by many of the leading lights of Yoga, including Swami Venkatesananda, a friend of T. Krishnamacharya and Sivananda's "jewel student"; scientist-engineer turned yogi and disciple of the Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Nishraisananda; and Tantric master Shuddhand Bharati, who initiated both Mani and Alan into Tantra. Among the yogis visiting South Africa, B.K.S. Iyengar made a tremendous impression upon Alan, transforming his understanding of asana and influencing the formation of the ISHTA principles of asana practice.

Seeking to integrate all the different systems and teachings they had experienced, in the 1960s Alan and Mani created ISHTA Yoga, aiming to acknowledge and celebrate the many different lineages that passed through their doorway, and to relate all this knowledge back to an individual understanding, quest for growth and self-knowledge. ISHTA seeks to give each student a clear understanding of how to incorporate information from different styles and practices as best suits their own unique needs.

After teaching in South Africa for 13 years, Alan came to the United States in 1975 and settled in Los Angeles, founding first the Yoga Tantra Institute, which attracted many Hollywood celebrities as students, and then the original Yoga Works studio with Maty Ezraty (later joined by Chuck Miller). Moving to New York in 1993, Alan founded the Yoga Zone studios. These studios became Be Yoga, which expanded Alan's teachings into one of the most successful regional Yoga Teacher Training programs in the country. Coming full circle, in 2004 Be Yoga rejoined the Yoga Works family of studios.

THE KEYSTONES OF ISHTA YOGA.

ISHTA Yoga derives its name first from Patanjali's Sutra 2.44:

SVADHYAYAD ISTADEVATA SAMPRAYOGAH.
(Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: Book 2, Sutra 44)

"Through self-study one ascertains one's necessary path to spiritual enlightenment. Traditionally this path is represented by an individualized spiritual deity."

Hindus are traditionally assigned *ishta devatas*, or particular gods who look after them throughout their lives, based on the qualities those deities possess or represent and the needs of the individual. For the same reason, we feel everyone who practices yoga needs an *ishta sadhana*, an individualized daily practice that enables them to best look after themselves.

Thus ISHTA means individualized or “personalized”, emphasizing ISHTA’s belief in finding the yoga that best suits the individual. The second meaning of ISHTA is the acronym Integrated Science of Hatha, Tantra and Ayurveda. These three principles – Hatha, Tantra and Ayurveda – are the three key sciences of yoga, and it is through understanding of these three sciences that the student can blend and find their own practice.

ISHTA Yoga provides in-depth studies for each of these three pillars for its practitioners and teachers; for today, we will give a brief introductory taste of each.

It is helpful at this point to review the eight-limbed path of Yoga, viewing it as a sequential path – that is to say, that the practice of one step of the path leads to the next step.

YAMA → NIYAMA → ASANA → PRANAYAMA → PRATYAHARA → DHARANA → DHYANA → SAMADHI

Hatha Yoga is the science of strengthening the weaknesses in an individual and removing the stress and blockages that form in our system, through the practice of asana and pranayama. The balance between strength and weakness, effort and surrender, is ha-tha (sun-moon) yoga. It is interesting to note that the asana element is what most Westerners consider to be synonymous with Hatha yoga; however, asana is the basis of reestablishing harmony in the physical body so that you may breathe deeply and freely in order to practice and explore pranayama. (Again, this follows the idea of the practice of each successive limb of the yogic path naturally following from the practice of the preceding limb.) Hatha yoga originated in the Tantric period.

Tantra embraces all aspects of our being, fulfilling that which Hatha yoga sets the stage for. Beginning with pranayama and following the last four limbs or Raja Yoga, it uses the mind and the energetic body to establish yoga in your system. To exist in the state of Tantra is to reside in the fullest potential in every aspect of our being; and more, to understand that all these aspects are interrelated. From the root words *tanoti*, expansion, and *trayati*, liberation, Tantra is the belief that our essential nature is divine, perfect “as it is”, part of the universal consciousness, and filled with bliss. The practice of Tantra is the practice of expanding our awareness into this blissful state of liberation through awareness of our innate perfection and acceptance of ourselves and everything around us.

The tools of Tantra in practice are: pranayama, Kriya yoga, visualization and all aspects of meditation. These yogic tools of Tantra must be combined with an understanding of the Tattvas. The Tattvas are the seed forces of our senses and of the five elements (space, air, fire, water and earth), which are all that truly exists on this material plane of consciousness. Just as the DNA blueprint holds the essential seeds of all we become, the Tattvas are the seeds from which all else grows, evolving into the *bhutas*, the elements; the Chakras; our *indriyas*, our senses; our karma; and more. (In modern terms, this is like the icon on a computer screen which can be opened into an enormous, complex, multimedia document. The icon holds the potential of all this information!) The Tattvas give us a basic understanding of Nature’s finer forces, which are then explored and expressed through all these different systems of understanding (such as visualization, the Chakra system, and so on) which all connect to and call upon elements of these forces.

Through awareness of the Tattvas, we begin to understand how Nature’s finer forces manifest the microcosm and the macrocosm of an individual and how to bring ourselves into balance with these forces, so as to live the most evolved and graceful life for the fulfillment of our needs and our individual karma.

Ayurveda means the science of life, but with the sense of: what makes you alive? Ayurveda is the study of *prana*, the vital force of life, and how it manifests uniquely in every individual. The easiest way to understand *prana* and its basic manifestations is the example of the live person versus the dead body – what happens when the life force leaves the body? First, the breath and movement leave. Then the heat, the magnetism. Finally, the physical matter of the body departs as the body returns to dust.

In Ayurveda, these distinct forces are called the *doshas* and are given names: *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha*. The *doshas* are another system or expression of the Tattvas, built upon relationships to particular elements:

-*Vata* (air and space) is the force that motivates all movement and breath: even on a cellular level, it moves the cells of our bodies and the thoughts that move through the mind. Lightness and creativity of mind and body are essential *Vata* characteristics.

-*Pitta* (fire and water) is the heat that is the temperature of our body, our metabolism, our physical magnetism, and the power for metabolism of thought, as thought too is a chemical process. The digestive fire in our system is created by acid, which is the combination of fire and water; the fire and directness of *Pitta* results in clarity and strength of thought.

-*Kapha* (earth and water) is the force of physical manifestation which binds water and earth together and creates the flesh body. Steadiness, patience and “grounded-ness” are *Kapha* qualities.

How the life force mixes with the elements and exists in every human being, is unique; each human being has their own unique makeup of the *doshas* to suit their spirit and its karmic tendencies. That unique mixture is called the *prakriti*, which is the constitution of a particular human being, or the constitutional makeup of the *doshas* in that human being. In other words, how *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha* are distributed in the individual – which is strongest, which is weakest.

The effect of our *prakriti* in our circumstances of our daily living creates our *vrikriti*, which is the state or condition our life force is in. In other words, our *prakriti* is the underlying immutable fingerprint and *vrikriti* is the mutable, ever-changing experience of the interplay of our *prakriti* in our current circumstances as it manifests in our daily life. (For example, stress, injuries, or changes in life or work demands would all impact your *vrikriti*.)

If our current circumstances and daily life do not “fit” us - - if our *vrikriti* does not match our *prakriti* - - this imbalance will create disharmony and disease on all levels of our being: mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. Therefore we need a good understanding of our inherent nature (*prakriti*) first, and then an awareness of our *vrikriti*, so through our yoga practice we can address the imbalances of our living to bring us into perfect balance and perfect health.

Using the principles of Ayurveda helps us determine the perfect practice at any given moment (for example, the meditation and asana you might practice to reduce a *Vata* imbalance would be different from the practice you might use to increase your *Pitta*.)

It is through this process that ISHTA Yoga, through the tools of Hatha, Tantra and Ayurveda, helps us to understand and address the unique construction and the unique needs of each individual.

THE ISHTA PRACTICE.

Based on the above keystones, the ISHTA practice integrates the physical and energetic tools of yoga. Asana, pranayama and meditation combine into a seamless practice which leads the individual to self-awareness, inner and outer equilibrium and self-transformation. Believing that the Tantric state of liberation, bliss and acceptance is our natural state, and the return to this state is the intent of the yoga practice, an ISHTA practice brings together asana to stretch, strengthen, balance and release the physical body; pranayama and visualization to still and quiet the mind; and meditation to expand our awareness to the universal state of bliss.

Depending upon the circumstances or the needs of the session (home practice, private lesson, group class) the practice could be shaped to address very specific needs and imbalances, to draw awareness to a certain energetic theme (for example: a *Pitta*-balancing practice; Muladhara Chakra; practices to root an intention or release unconscious burdens; full Chakra toning and balancing; etc) or simply to create a well-balanced whole which will generate peace and equilibrium in mind, body and spirit. If there is a targeted energetic focus or meditative practice, asana will be chosen to increase awareness of the focus point via the physical experience.

A well-balanced sample class follows.

AN ISHTA CLASS.

A classical ISHTA class follows this format:

- Introductory talk explaining that day's energetic focus and/or related practices (specific pranayama and meditation technique, asana points to focus on to support energetic focus, etc).
- Pre-meditative asana to open the body, still the mind and draw the senses in for meditation
- Practice of active tantric meditation techniques, followed by 18-minute seated meditation
- Regrounding of energy and short savasana to conclude meditation
- Post-meditation asana designed to ground the energy and rebalance awareness

For a basic ISHTA class, the meditation technique taught would be the **ISHTA DIKSHA**. This technique, taught in sequence, consists of:

- Seated, a few breaths in namaste mudra to center and ground.
- *Nadi shodhana* (alternate nostril) pranayama to balance energy and breath and draw it into the shushumna nadi, central cord of awareness
- *Kriya* breathing to purify the shushuma nadi
- *Ajna bhedana*, piercing the third eye and focusing awareness there, by activating its *keshertram* point between and above the eyebrows.
- 18 minutes of seated meditation, with use of mantra as needed to still and focus the mind: *Mang* to combat restlessness, *Aim* for inspiration, *Ram* to counteract anxiety and create steadiness, etc.
- Reground the energy by bringing the palms to *anjali mudra*, rubbing them to build heat, separating them to sense the *prana*, and regrounding this energy by bringing the palms to the face, the neck and shoulders, and then moving the hands downward over each chakra center, finally rooting the energy down into the legs and feet, releasing out the lower body and moving into brief *Savasana*.

A sample pre-meditative asana sequence might be:

1. Simple Vinyasa to expand the breath, connect awareness to the breath, move energy along the spine:
 - a. *Majariasana* / *Bidalasana* (Upward Cat/ Downward Cat).
 - b. *Majariasana* / *Balanasana variation* (Upward Cat/ Extended Cat Seal)
 - c. *Balanasana variation* / Knee Stand / *Bhujangasana* ("Bali Seal" vinyasa: Standing Cat, Cat Seal, Baby Cobra, Cat Seal)
2. *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward Facing Dog): release meridians and open the unconscious along the backs of the legs, prepare the legs to sit in meditation
3. *Eka Pada Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Closed 3-Point Pose): work deeper into the backs of the legs
4. *Vajrasana* variation 1 (Diamond Seat with toes tucked under): stretch toes, open meridians
5. *Vajrasana* variation 2 (Diamond Seat with feet flat, lifting knees): stretch tops of feet, engage core and root chakra
6. *Gomukhasana* arms in *Vajrasana* (Cowface arm variation in Diamond Seat)
7. Seated *Chandrasana* variation ("Mermaid seat" / Side Lean): sitting over on to one hip, feet over to other side, knees bent, bottom foot tucked over top ankle, walk same arm away from feet, stretch opposite arm up and over
8. *Dandasana* with arm variations – fingertips behind, forward and in *Utthitha*
9. Forward Bend in *Parsva Sukhasana* (Potted palm with side stretch): Fold forward in *Sukhasana*, walk hands to each side
10. Forward Bend in *Sukhasana* (Potted palm with arm variations): Fold forward in *Sukhasana*, fingertips behind, hands to hip crease to pull back/ ground down, hands walk forward

Practice of ISHTA DIKSHA follows as above.

A sample post-meditative asana sequence:

1. *Setu Bandha Sarvangasana* (Bridge/ Two-legged table)
2. “Windshield wiper” legs – in Bridge, widen feet to edges of mat, drop knees to one side and other, release hips
3. *Apanasana* (Wind expeller)
4. Rock up to sitting
5. *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward Dog)
6. *Eka Pada Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Closed 3-Point pose)
7. *Virabhadrasana I* (Warrior I)
8. *Ardha Chaturunga, Chaturunga* (Plank, Chaturunga)
9. *Urdvha Mukha Svanasana* (Upward Facing Dog)
10. *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward Dog)
11. Repeat 5-10 on second side
12. Walk hands back to feet
13. *Uttanasana* variation (Ragdoll)
14. *Utkatasana* (Chair)
15. *Samasthiti* (Standing Pose)
16. *Vrksasana* (Tree)
17. *Virabhadrasana II* variation (Crescent / Reverse Warrior II)
18. *Parsvakonasana* variation (Right Angle pose with lower hand lifted off floor)
19. *Virabhadrasana II* (Warrior II)
20. Repeat 15-19 on second side
21. *Prasarita Padottanasana* (Fan pose)
22. *Utkatasana* variation (Bound chair)
23. *Chandrasana* standing variation (Blown palm)
24. *Adho Mukha Svanasana* wall variation (“Puppy Dog”/ arm extension at wall)
25. *Uttanasana* wall variation (Forward bend at wall – hips at wall)
26. *Utkatasana* wall variation (Chair at wall – hips at wall)
27. *Namaste* in *Samasthiti* (Prayer pose in Standing Pose)