

# Staying in the Flow

Enhancing Immune System Functioning with Systemic Yoga

By Ateeka – *Founder of Systemic Yoga*

Life offers us constant opportunities in which we can become more powerful or more vulnerable depending on our body-mind system's response. As yoga practitioners, we can aim towards a practice that creates greater adaptability in our bio-system and how we perceive, respond and learn from the environment we live in. Healthy bio-systems, or what we more commonly refer to as our "body" have the inherent capacity for mutability and change. When our system's capacity for response becomes compromised by cultural factors, repetition in movement and fixity of opinion, we become vulnerable to illness and disease. A mutable, intelligent, fluid yoga practice can help to enhance our system's capacity for flowing with change and opening to transformation.

## **WE ARE SYSTEMIC WHOLES**

Living systems are integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller parts.<sup>1</sup> Their essential or "systemic", properties are properties of the whole. Today, we are shifting our view of the body as an isolated object living in the world, instead to an organism of intelligence in constant relationship with itself and with its environment. In this sense, reality is a mutable network of relationships.

When we perceive the body as this mutable, changeable expression of life force energy, we better understand how stress related illnesses and disorders can be attributed to the contraction of one's biosystem against the flow of life and its loss of contact with natural cyclical rhythms. When we lose our contact with life's rhythms, we decrease our natural capacity for healthy immune functioning.

## **A NEW VISION OF THE IMMUNE SYSTEM**

We begin by shifting our perception from having an immune system to living within an immune “network.” A network implies a connected body of information in constant mutual response for the greater benefit of the bio-system as a whole. It ceaselessly rebalances itself as our internal and external environments change.<sup>ii</sup> For years, scientists have used militant terminology when describing the immune system. We have described the mast cells, basal cells, platelets and others as “warriors, soldiers, armies fighting against enemy intruders” into the body. However, because we are systemic wholes, even the foreign visitors like cancer, viruses and others can be considered a part of our creation and we can approach healing with a new perspective of amplifying the radiant health of the whole, rather than simply eradicating an unwanted part.

From the traditional point of view, an immune system will only develop when there are outside disturbances to which it can respond. It was believed that if there was no “attack”, no antibodies would be developed. However, Recent experiments have shown, that even animals that are completely sheltered from disease-causing organisms still develop fully functioning immune systems. From this new point of view, it is natural because the immune system’s main function is not to respond to outside challenges but more importantly to relate to itself.<sup>iii</sup> In this sense, immunity can be seen as a conscious network of self-recognition with the ability to recognize self from non-self.

A characteristic of an immune network functioning in its optimal integrity is that maintaining health takes less “effort” and our systems retain more vital life force energy called *prana*. Many yoga traditions suggest the use of particular *pranayama* (breathing exercises) to cultivate more *prana* in our systems. *Prana* rides the currents of healthy breathing and movement.

We can cultivate a yoga practice that uses much less force and instead effortlessly rides the naturally arising tides of our breath and body's fluid system. Striving to achieve or perfect a pose, or forcing to stay still in a meditative position may in fact deplete *prana* rather than enhance its presence in our system. Stress, even in a yogic context, diminishes *prana*. Learning to recognize and then live in a state of "*prana conservation*", we gain access to more vital energy for the benefit of our entire system, for healing, for energy, for creative endeavors, for moving through our life with more joy and lightness.

### **RIDING FLUID TIDES**

An organic yoga practice that rides the tides of our fluid system enhances our adaptability and helps us to become more perceptive to our inner and outer environments. At the watery beginning of human life, the electrical meeting of sperm and ovum happens in an environment of nearly 95% water. As we mature, our bodies maintain a composition of nearly 70% water through the cellular membranes, the cranio-sacral and synovial fluid, blood, bone marrow, lymph system and more. Our immune network communicates via the fluids that permeate our tissues. The two are cooperative partners in maintaining health in the system.

Cultural and psychological imprinting, neuromuscular repetition and stress factors constrain the vital flow of information through the immune and fluid networks making us vulnerable to physical and mental illness. Rather than following a fixed system of postures that maintain a patterned tissue structure without organic release, we can experiment with movement that dives into the flux and flow of emerging and dissolving form, in turn relaxing the nervous system, releasing tension from the body tissues and allowing them to become flooded with fluid and more oxygen. An *asana* (from *sanskrit*: a position that is conducive

*to bliss*) can serve as a point of reference from which we expand outward into the natural flow of breath and fluid in our body.

By becoming increasingly aware and responding to the tide-like fluid movement in our bodies, we can maintain an adaptive open system constantly recharging its vibrant electro-magnetic field (aura).

## **SLOWING DOWN**

“All action begins in rest.” Lao-Tzu

Our society continues to accelerate to a collective rhythm that can cause stress and break down our ability to self-regulate. External stimuli of media, advertising, cultural opinions bombard us and dilute our experience of authentic self-awareness. We retain this information not only in our minds, but also in our body's tissues. All living systems need time to integrate new information. If we are inundated with too much, too fast, we can become overloaded with stimuli that compromises the integrity of our bio-system.

I suggest to begin every yoga session with a period of rest and observation. This does not necessarily mean sleep, but to lie down on your back, your belly, your side or in a supported and comfortable *balasana*, child's pose and observe, without judgment, the state of your system in this moment. Give yourself at least 5 minutes at the beginning of your practice to SLOW DOWN and you will find that the entirety of your asana exploration will be infused with greater perception, openness and global awareness. The aim of yoga is toward union of the natural polarities of life, however if we are focused only on the active, forward moving principles of “doing” or “action”, then we will find it difficult to know the opposite energy of “non-doing” and “receiving”. This time of slowing down allows balance between the polarities of doing and non-doing.

## **FOLLOWING THE BREATH**

From this slowed down space of increased self-awareness, we can also be more aware of how our breath flows and does not flow in our bodies. We can learn much about where we hold habitual tension by simply listening to the breath. We tend to use a great amount of life force energy to maintain tension patterns in our system.

As we decelerate and relax into our body-consciousness, the autonomic nervous system shifts into parasympathetic mode. In this state, we are no longer “on alert”, our tissues relax and fluid flows more freely through our bodies. The breath grows more ample and expansive and invites more *prana* into our system as a whole. We feel at ease and safe in our own skin. All of the movement in the practice wants to swell up out of our natural breath, like a wave taking form from the ocean, and then return to its wholeness. Any movement that is against the breath is against life. Try to remain in the “uncertainty” of where your movements will go next. Trust the wisdom of the breath and the fluid to guide you to what is truly needed for balance in your system in this moment. It takes great courage to be “in the now” without knowing. If you find yourself “stuck” and confused about “what to do next” return to the Earth, return to the breath and slide back into the slowed down mind. Take your time. What is needed will arise naturally from this state. Movements that ride the breath may be more subtle and at first difficult to notice, but when you have found this flow, it creates an abundant vibrancy within your system that enhances all functioning.

## **BECOMING A RIVER OF CHANGE**

For the practice of yoga asana to be truly effective in uniting the body's forces and enhancing coherency, it must become a practice of flow and change. Our very nature is to move, to breathe, to fold in, to expand out, to be in a joyous inter-play with our environment. We do not "do" movement; essentially we "are" movement. How we orient and exchange with our environment shapes who we are and how we feel.

Repetition of the same sequences of asana day after day creates rigidity in the nervous system that does not allow for the highest adaptability to all the events we encounter in life. By inviting spontaneous variation into the practice and seeing each asana as a starting point for a brand new exploration into movement, into the space around us, into our expression as human beings, we enhance and even grow new neural connections.

## **THE HEALING ASPECT OF PLEASURE**

As we enter the free flow of movement and then linger in the stillness that is a refined stage of this movement, we realize a pleasurable state of meditative presence that permeates the body-mind. This is what the ancients referred to as "*ananda*"; bliss, delight, pleasure, an inner rejoicing. True pleasure brings us to a place of deep acceptance and rest into who we are. It is not necessarily an "excitement" but instead a wide sensation of wellness that increases coherence, connection and communication and invites our inner inquiries to continue.

## **BOOSTING IMMUNITY = BOOSTING CONNECTIVITY**

From here we focus on a fluid, inquisitive yoga practice that is based on loving what is, on increasing connectivity and coherency in every part of our body-mind. By engaging in a yoga of truly spontaneous organic flow, we become more perceptive of our surroundings, more sensitive to other beings and more connected to our communities. By knowing ourselves more authentically we lift

the veil of cultural conditioning and decide what is good for us now, in this moment. We become autonomous, self-reliant individuals. Out of this awareness sprouts a life of less stress, more compassion and a more profound connection with others that improves the functioning of our immune network and biosystems as a whole.

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<sup>i</sup> Capra, Frithof, *The Web of Life*, Flamino-Harper Collins, 1997 p. 36

<sup>ii</sup> Upledger, Dr. John, *Cell Talk*, North Atlantic Books 2003

<sup>iii</sup> Varela,, Francisco , and Antonio, Coutinho, 'Second Generation Immune Networks', *Immunology Today*, Vol. 12, No. 5, pp 159 – 166, 1991

Ateeka has developed SYSTEMIC YOGA based on the fact that all living systems are connected. Our bodies have cycles of growth, decay and regrowth. In the stress of our modern society, it can be easy to fall out of balance and lose contact with our body's natural cyclical rhythms. In Systemic Yoga, living cycles and movements of life are honored and explored

SYSTEMIC YOGA combines ancient traditions with modern relevance and includes fluid spontaneous movement grown out of asana, expansive pranayama and modern breathwork, sound activations, somatic meditations and Tantsu (partners bodywork) all within the context of the collective archetypal energy patterns and symbology of the Vedic and Hindu pantheon.

Ateeka lives in Italy and shares SYSTEMIC YOGA worldwide and will offer a revolutionary SYSTEMIC YOGA TEACHER TRAINING in Bali – April 2009

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