

Tree pose (*Vrksasana*) has many lessons to teach us; for example, strength (*sthirra*), balance (*equinimity*) and non-grasping (*aparigraha*). However, to me, **Focus** is what really gives this asana distinction. After all, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras begin with the definition of Yoga as "direct focus on the moment" (*Atha Yoga Anusasanam*). The next three lines further clarify this by saying that "Yoga is the settling of the mind into silence." When the mind has settled, we are established in our essential nature rather than confused by our

"monkey-mind". So in other words, when we can quiet the mind, by focusing on the now, we have more clarity. Seems pretty simple, right? But of course, not. Our own biology is stacked against us here...not to mention all the external and internal distractions that pull us from focus every moment. So yes, if an asana can teach us the lesson of Focus, I think it is quite valuable.

In Sanskrit, there are at least twenty different words for Focus. Obviously, the yogis believed it was an important skill! In the Yoga Sutras, we see two important terms associated with Focus: *Eka Tattva* (one pointed focus) and *Dharana* (Concentration) and a third term *drishti* (Gaze point) as an important tool to achieve focus. *The Ramayana*, an important epic of a period just before the Yoga Sutras, tells a beautiful story illustrating the importance of focus to overcome obstacles. It involves a beautiful queen, a brave superhero, love, jealousy and trees. Though it hails from a period over 2500 years ago, it still holds truth for us today.

The Story of Sita and the Trees



Queen Sita and her King, Ram, were well-known for their great relationship. Though most took joy in seeing this royal (but rather humble, they had been banished to wander in the forest) couple so beautifully in love, there were others who were very jealous. One, was the arrogant demon king Ravana who had an opposite reputation. Much like a wealthy drug lord, he lived set apart from the rest of the world on the resplendent island of Sri Lanka in an opulent palace filled with earthly delights and sensual pleasures.

Ravana was also known for his scandalous “way with the ladies”. It was said that any woman, married or not, who he took a fancy to, succumbed to his seduction. But, like a lot of powerful rulers, Ravana was never satisfied and always wanted more. Seeing the devoted Sita so focused on Ram filled him with jealousy. His sense of entitlement and power generated in him a desire to show he could crush their relationship and sway Sita’s devotion to him.

Ravana came up with a devious plan to distract Sita from her focus by tempting her to admire a beautiful deer he offered her for a pet. When she switched her attention for just a moment to the deer, Ravana took advantage of her lapse in focus and kidnapped her. He took her to his lush palace on Sri Lanka, believing his own sway and that of the opulent surroundings, could easily switch her devotion to him.

Ravana threw all he had at her.....jewels, expensive clothing, fabulous food and servants. He even offered to make her his chief wife, queen of all the luxury and riches he lorded over. But, throughout all of this, Sita remained focused on Ram. She wouldn’t even spend one night in the palace but rather chose to live outside in the Ashoka grove that surrounded the palace.

Ashoka trees are a symbol of love and the term ashoka means “without sorrow.” Every night, Sita slept under the comforting and healing properties of the grove, soaking up the ideals they represented. Every night she grew stronger in her resolve to stay true. Of course this only motivated Ravana to accelerate his seduction attempts, to which Sita always replied, “I am your prisoner, not your guest and I will never be your woman. I am Rama's wife, always.”

Finally, infuriated Ravana retorted, “I’ll give you just one year to change your mind. After that time, I will eat you!” He sent guards to surround her and though they were told not to hurt her, they were encouraged to use psychological tactics to break her down. They used threats, telling her that Rama would never find her, and even if he did, Sri Lanka’s island fortress was impregnable. They used flattery, reminding her that life in the comfort of Ravana's harem was any woman’s dream and that a woman as royal and beautiful as Sita deserved to live in such a a palace and to be treated like the queen, rather than wandering the forest with her exiled husband.

As daughter of Bhumi Devi, the earth goddess, Sita had an enhanced connection to rooted things. It was her superpower. Sitting quietly, with her back to the trunk of an ashoka tree and surrounded by the grove, she could feel wisdom pouring into her body. In her focus, she could hear them say, “Stay still. Be calm and steady, like us. Seasons change. This captivity is not forever. Let every thought, every breath, every beat of your heart broadcast “Rama...find me. Rama. Rama.” So in spite of the cajoling and threats, Sita remained undaunted, waiting with focused devotion.

Meanwhile, back on India’s mainland, Rama was also focused. He called forth his own superhero, Hanuman who was known for his extreme devotion to Ram. Hanuman’s superpower was that he could fly and change size as needed. When Rama asked for him to find Sita, he was ready to go. Rama gave him a ring to give to Sita, to prove to her that Hanuman was there at his behest. With the ring carefully secured around his neck,

Humanuman began his journey with his famous leap across the ocean from India to Sri Lanka.

That story and the story of Humanuman's adventures in finding Sita is much too involved (lots of adventures and lessons) to elaborate on here. Suffice it to say that one day, Sita heard her name being called and lifted her gaze to see Hanuman, in the form of a tiny monkey in a tree above her. Even before Hanuman showed the golden ring to her, she knew he had been sent by Ram to save her. Although the way home was not without more adventures, Sita did end up back in Ram's arms. Her patient and focused devotion rewarded with a happy ending.



The Asana

As I said, there are many physical lessons to learn and practice in Vrksasana. To find balance, begin with establishing the foundation of the rooting action of your feet hip-width apart. Think of the steadiness of mountain (*tadasana*), the strength of a tree trunk and the rooting action of a tree. As you shift weight to one leg, work on balance and non-grasping. It might not come right away, be patient, devoted to the effort. You'll need to let go

(*ishavaripranidhana*) of the need for perfection as your body sways to find its center. All these lessons are super important.



But what really helps is FOCUS. So even before you leave mountain, find an unmoving spot in front, preferably eye level and keep focus on that spot as weight is shifted to one foot. Slowly draw the lifted foot somewhere up the standing leg and externally rotate that femur in its socket. Don't worry how high you lift the foot, just keep the gaze on the spot and continue through the swaying and wobbling. If the wobbling stops, challenge can be found by shifting the arms upward or even closing the eyes. The point is to feel how your body and mind work towards stillness. In fact, with the mind-body attempting to organize proprioceptive communication, the mind lets go of outside distractions. The mind-body moves more completely into the NOW, into focus. Atha Yoga Anusasanam! It's even fun to add that as a mantra here....ahh tahh yo gah an u sa sha nam. You might even imagine yourself in a grove of trees and practice absorbing the strength and wisdom as Sita did.

The Physiology: How Focus Works

The main reason focus works is like with Sita, it eliminates the distractions. In her case it was the threatening and cajoling attempts of Ravana and his guards. In tree pose, it might be mental distractions like "how do I look? why am I such a loser and unable to stand on one foot? am I doing better than my friend? what does my teacher think? ".

Other distractions are physical. As our eyes take in wobbling from others, the room around us and our own body, our proprioceptive system is challenged. Our proprioceptive system, sometimes called our sixth sense, operates by taking in signals from all of our "other" senses. For many activities, where we've already established balance (think walking) this

happens quickly and automatically. However, when our balance is challenged, our body again needs to establish a consistent position in space, focus. To determine that, our proprioceptive system combines three signals from the outside: head position from the inner ear, physical information about the positions of the muscles and joints involved, and a reference point from the eyes.

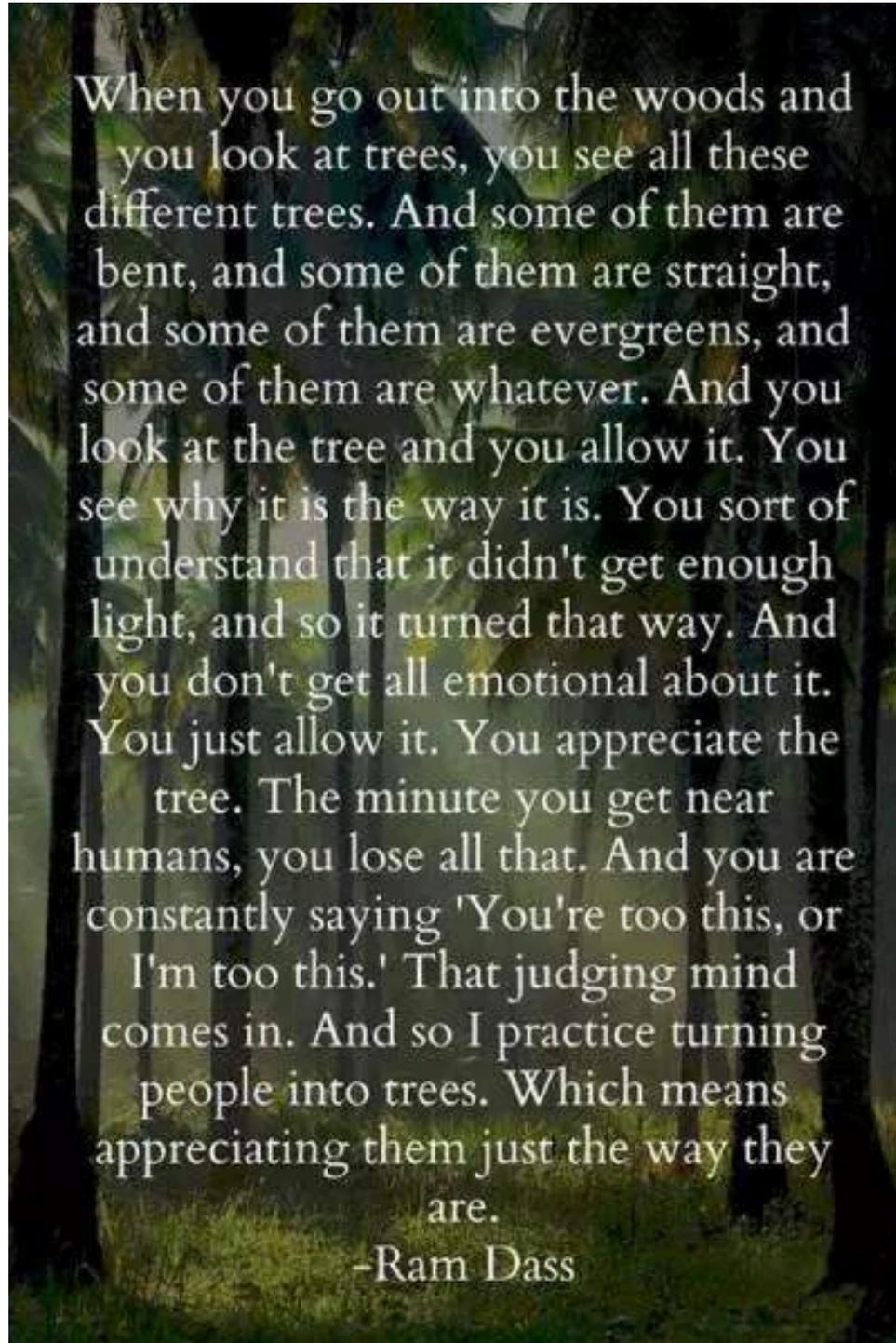
The fluid filled inner ear canal system coordinates incoming information from all three factors. If you've been on a rocking boat, you've probably experienced how important it is to provide yourself with an unmoving gaze point to avoid getting dizzy or nauseous. This helps the fluid in the ear to find steadiness. It's the same when you narrow your foundation. Our body senses imbalance and calls for the proprioceptive system to kick in. This requires an unmoving reference point from the outside to mark the position of the body in space, allowing adjustments to be made accordingly. Like all our body's systems, the more we challenge and practice proprioception, the stronger it becomes.

Other Physical Benefits

Tree pose is literally the first step into the exciting world of taking a risk, challenging our body to go off-center. It is an important first step for understanding and doing its counterpart, handstand (*adho mukha vrksasana*). It is strengthening, asking for work not just from the supporting leg, but also core and upper back work to establish a neutral spine. The leg that's raised and in external rotation gets a good adductor stretch and abductor strengthening. It's great for circulation and a preparation for all open hip (one hip in external rotation) asanas like Warrior II (*Virabhadrasa II*), Side-Angle (*Parsvakonasana*), Balancing Half-Moon (*Ardha Chandrasana*) and Triangle (*Trikonasana*). If I had to pick only one pose to do everyday, tree would be it.

Ram Dass's Story

I cannot end a story without adding my favorite from Ram Dass. You might want to use this as a focus point as you practice your Tree pose.



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