

Yoga and Archetypes:

A Natural Evolution of Observation and Practice

AN ARCHETYPE IS AN ORIGINAL MODEL OR TYPE AFTER WHICH OTHER SIMILAR THINGS ARE PATTERNED. In Sanskrit, the language in which Yoga was codified, an archetype is known as *Purvaja*. *Purvaja* means ahead of all others or firstborn. An archetype may be derived from, but not limited to the following: elements found in nature, mythological stories, spiritual symbols, aspects of character, geometrical patterns and shapes and certain words.

ARCHETYPES EAST AND WEST

To understand the context of archetypes, we must look briefly at the Vedic cosmological view explained in the Upanishadic writings. To create the universe, a unified energetic field (*Brahman*), gave birth to Nature (*Prakriti*) and Consciousness (*Purusha*), providing the first archetypes of Feminine and Masculine, Mother and Father, Material and Spirit. The material world is associated with the feminine which gives rise to the three qualities of nature also known in yoga as the *Gunas*: balance, activity and inactivity. The interplay of these three qualities is responsible for all possible objects of thought and matter. When we speak of archetypes, what we are ultimately talking about is connecting to the deepest part of ourselves – who and what we are when connected at the most intimate level to the creator. Of course, there are many levels of understanding we must go through before coming to the complete awareness of the ultimate archetypal creative forces.

The modern reader may immediately associate the term archetype with the work of Carl Jung in the early Twentieth century, who posited that the unconscious articulated expression in symbolic form. In Jungian psychology, an inherited pattern of thought, or symbolic imagery, is derived from the past collective experience, or “collective unconscious” and present in the individual consciousness. Jung derived specific archetypes from the mystical symbols of many cultures and traditions as expressed in fairy tales, legends and myths. Jungian archetypes may be patterns based purely on nature or complex human emotions, such as Hero, Mystic or Princess.

The Vedic view of the Archetype suggests that the chain of existence emerges from matter to the elemental forms of existence. The patterns and personifications of subtle energies eventually become all of nature, of which humanity and its psyche are a part. Through Yoga poses, it is possible to embody both natural and humanistic archetypes and go back through this chain. For some,

this aspect of Yoga will come more naturally and easily, such as visually or artistically inclined people, who are able to see an image in the mind while performing an act like a Yoga posture. This will improve a Yoga pose practice by connecting an intention within a specific pose to the archetype of that pose. Others may need to study archetypes for some time before understanding them within a Yoga practice. This article is speaking to the universal archetypes that allow Yoga poses to be accessible to people of all religious and cultural backgrounds.

ARCHETYPES AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Each individual has an attraction, or sometimes an aversion to certain archetypal patterns. The attraction or aversion can be a powerful call to a greater understanding of the pattern, and ultimately, the true self. This may sound like a simple process but, it is not, as the nature and structure of the ego can block a true view of the archetypal pattern that is being acted out.

The ego often protects us from pain that we do not wish to feel. This protection may be beneficial to our mental state at the time it occurs (perhaps allowing us to functionally survive trauma), but it leaves us with scar tissue in the form of mental and physical blockages that manifest as repetitive patterns of behavior. While our present lives may sometimes seem like a collection of unrelated incidents, viewing experiences from an archetypal or symbolic viewpoint can help us to bring cohesion and purpose as we work through certain repeated patterns and ego defenses.

For Jung, a key concept was that archetypes have a shadow side that is to be worked through to achieve the ideal of the archetype. As an example, the ideal of the Damsel in Distress, or Princess Archetype, is to learn to come to her own rescue, while the Shadow side would manifest as accepting weakness as an attribute of the feminine.

Archetypes can help people focus, when they are unable to focus in other ways. This may apply to children, adults who are visually or artistically inspired, or those who have trouble with traditional religious imagery. Archetypes (and Yoga poses) based on nature may easily vanquish our defenses where traditional talk therapy has not succeeded. For example, someone who has a troubled relationship to the Father archetype may find it easier to work through the Lion pose than to rehash painful childhood incidents.

YOGA POSES COME FROM ANIMALS

Each animal has a sacred gift for humans to learn. Animals are not constricted by the ego and animal poses can help us to connect with powerful aspects of the soul that may be suppressed by modern life. Before entering into an animal pose, it can be helpful to fully visualize and then feel the experience of being the animal. Try to envision where the animal lives, how its body moves, how it eats and how it plays. Let's take Cobra pose as an example.



The cobra moves with its belly on the ground but must reach up to see clearly, much as we are often kept busy with worldly pursuits and make an effort

to reach higher goals. It takes faith and courage to rise up beyond the material world and peer into the unknown spiritual world. Once the upper body is poised above the ground, we must continue to accept what we see from the new vista. The lower back is consciously relaxed while the eyes remain focused on heaven.

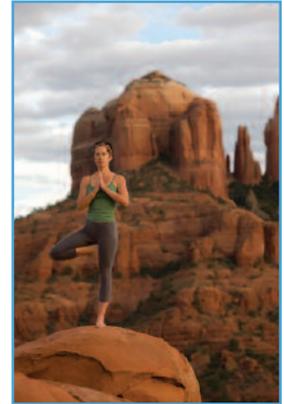
The ferocious aspect of the cobra cannot be ignored. It comes up suddenly and with deadly force, much like the workings of nature or the trappings of the world. These forces or qualities of existence must be allowed to rise and fall without further ensnaring. This process allows for the achievement of transformation, the gift that is inherent in the snake's ability to shed its skin. It is this shedding of its skin that accounts for the Cobra's (and snakes in general) unique quality.

The very nature of life entails shift and change. What is your relation to change? Many people are afraid to die; yet this fear may keep them from fully living. How do you identify with this statement?

YOGA POSES COME FROM NATURE

By observing the physical environment, we observe the workings of the universe. The sky contains the planets and stars; the earth and sea alone contain a diversity of existence that continues to evolve and amaze us. New discoveries of plants, insects and animals happen every day! Observing even one small part of this profusion of elements can give us insight into the structure of the whole. Poets of all cultures highlight deep truths by observing the flow of water, the energy of the sun, the power of a mountain. With that in mind, let's apply the use of archetypes to Tree Pose.

The majestic tree is rooted deeply in the ground, and at the same time extends its branches towards the sky. Even the most solid trees have branches that sway in the wind. A tree cooperates with and sustains other natural forms such as birds, mammals and insects. Insects and vines may destroy a tree, but when a tree dies, it becomes one with the forest floor and sustains life



in a new form. A living tree transforms all the life forms around it when it takes in carbon dioxide and releases oxygen. Because of its many beneficial qualities, a tree may be viewed as the ultimate example of selflessness.

Reflect on your balance with others. How do you work together in cooperation to sustain your family, your network of friends, and society in general? How do you feel when the winds of change blow through your life? Can you remain solidly rooted while you explore aspects of the spirit? How do you transform harmful energies into those from which you and others around you can benefit? How do you use your life to support others?

These are just two examples of how understanding archetypes and applying the big philosophical questions that come through them can transform a personal yoga pose practice. Yoga Poses also come from archetypes like Tools (think about poses like bow, boat, wheel and plough), Structures (i.e. triangle, wheel, side angle) and the overall Human experience (child's pose, warrior 1 & 2, dancer, prayer and corpse pose). Each pose has its own set of attributes and qualities that come with the association of what the pose is mimicking in nature. The question is – are you ready to view your practice through this unique lens?

A beginning Yoga student will first have to master how to do the poses physically. It is important that practitioners of all levels learn the physical poses from an experienced teacher working within a specific system of Yoga. After you have had some experience with the physical poses, then you can work on incorporating your understanding of the archetype of the pose and help take your practice to a whole new level of self realization. ▲

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