

Ashtanga Grammar

The Three Foundational Elements of Practice

Intention ▪ Alignment ▪ Expression



Ashtanga Grammar is not an alternative method to the tradition. It is a **lens for reading traditional practice** that applies to all its aspects, asana as much as meditation: it is how I work in my personal practice and in teaching.

Three Elements

They are the building blocks through which practice can be read. Like the grammatical rules of a language, they serve and support any type of practice — not only Ashtanga Vinyasa.

A valid principle holds true as long as it applies to the person in front of us.

It is a pragmatic approach based on experience, not dogma: **a tool for orientation, the path is yours.** To keep things simple, in this PDF we will look at the 3 elements through asana — it is the door, not the house.



Alan Calaon, founder of
Ashtanga Marga Yoga





Intention — What Do I Want to Do?

Intention answers the general question: "why am I doing this posture?"

Most of us learned to perform asana with little instruction, copying what we saw from a teacher (in some cases perhaps only following videos, which could not answer questions). In short, the way we learn to move our body in asana is similar to that of a child imitating a gesture without yet understanding its meaning.

Intention is the organising force that structures every action and determines its direction. There are multiple intentions within the same posture, just as there are different intentions in each practice session. This is one of the reasons why always practising the same series in Ashtanga is not a limitation, but a challenge to go deeper and see what inevitably keeps changing — **the asana become a mirror of ourselves and of our state in the present moment.**



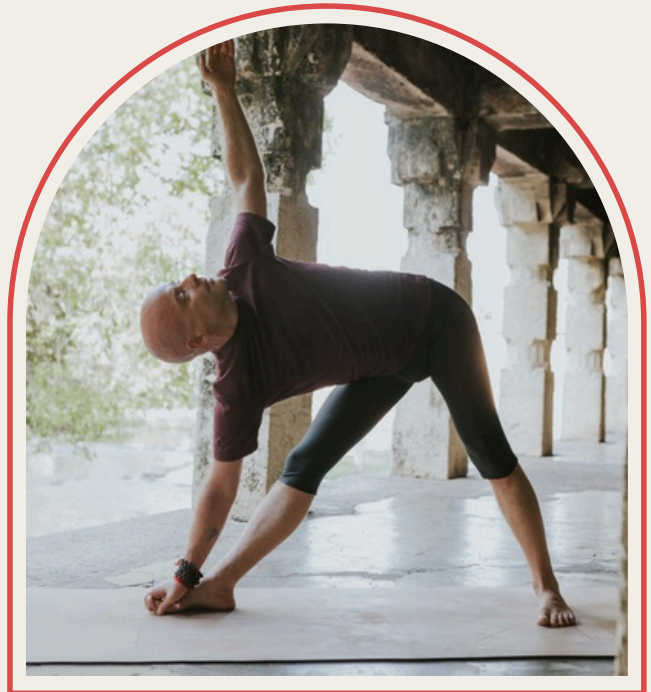
Example Marichyasana B



Picture yourself in marichyasana B on the right side — left leg in padmasana, right leg bent, you grab the left wrist and that's it: it's a forward bend. The right posterior chain is not stretching and the main intention is to flatten the lumbar curve of the spine. Wait — I'm externally rotating the left hip to place the foot in padmasana, so maybe that's the intention. Certainly I can't neglect the internal rotation of the shoulders. I could focus my attention on the ankle of the padmasana foot, which often becomes a problem — at least now the padmasana is complete, before bending forward that was out of the question. Well, at least it's not like the C, where I can't breathe. What? Oh right, there's also Manipura chakra.

And there it is, many aspects make up a posture, it is never just one intention: it is the overlapping of layers, of different intentions, using the posture as a tool for listening to and knowing ourselves.

Example Trikonasana



Picture yourself in trikonasana on the right side. Ok, this one is simpler: feet firmly on the ground and your gaze pointing up toward the left hand. Clear enough, the intention is to open the right hip in external rotation and stack the left on top. Although maybe I should first manage to keep both legs fully extended, perhaps that's the intention I need to follow first. Or is it about opening the chest by drawing the left shoulder back? No, I need to grab the right big toe with my hand — but hey, how do I open the torso without the pelvis slipping back? My spine: I need to keep my spine straight! And the bandha? I don't think I'm breathing well...

Ok, maybe trikonasana is not such a simple posture after all, and in any case it is not easy to do as well. Here too the **intentions** we can bring to its expression are multiple. They do not necessarily need to happen all at once; **they need to be part of our expression of the posture, a unique expression, of a moment that lasts five breaths.**



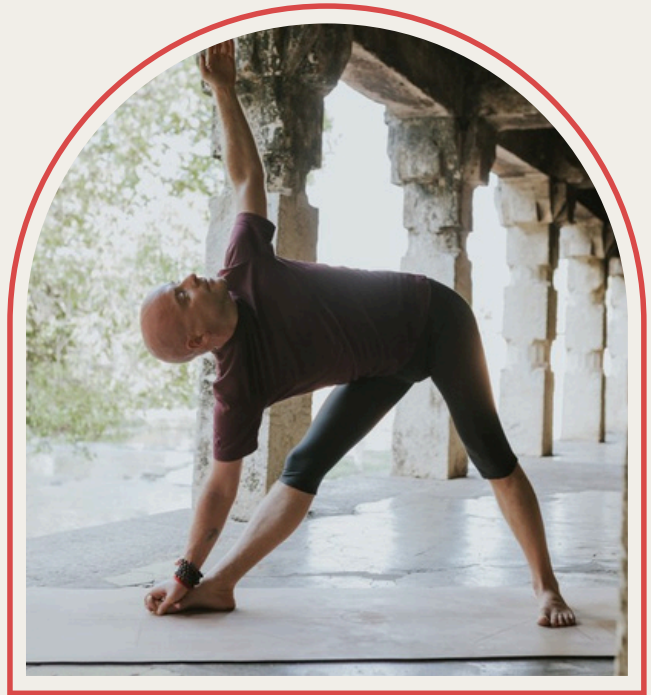
Alignment — How Is It Done?

Alignment answers the general question: “how should I do this posture?”

Alignment is the **structure, the way the parts of the body organise themselves in relation to each other and in relation to gravity**. This includes the bases of support, the orientation of the joints, the direction of forces. A **functional alignment** is not the one that looks good from the outside: it is the one that allows the posture to bear weight, to breathe, to be sustained without unnecessary compensations, to **use only the tensions needed and release all the others**.

On one hand, an effective practice must take us to work at the edge of our comfort zone — where the work becomes effective. On the other hand, the goal we must never lose sight of is that a daily practice must support us so that we can practice the following day. If we get hurt the game is no longer fun. It is not a race, but if it were it would certainly not be a sprint — more of an endurance race, where results come over the long term.

Example Trikonasana



Let's take trikonasana on the right side again. **Alignment** tells you how the body should be organised on paper: right foot rotated 90°, inner arches lifted, weight distributed between heel and ball of the foot, the pelvis tilts laterally only, the torso does not fall forward or back. It is the ideal reference, not a rigid prescription, but the starting point from which to read what is actually happening. **Without this reference you cannot tell whether what you see is a choice or a limitation.**

Alignment starts from the foundations (in this case the feet) and builds progressively: each part of the body organises itself in relation to the one that precedes it. And it does not stop at the physical: **the bandha, the breath, even attention are part of alignment.** But that is material for another conversation.



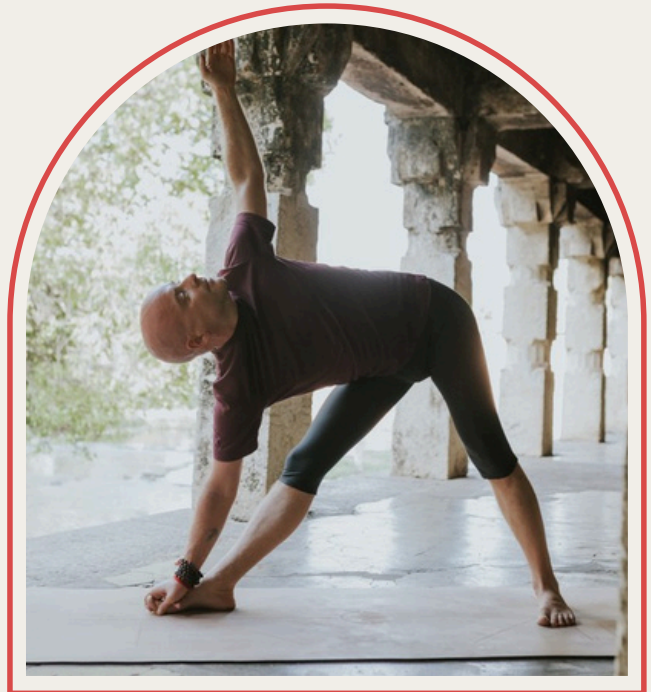
Expression — How I Do It

Expression is not an answer to a question, it is our statement, it is giving form to the integration of intention and alignment.

Once the main intention of the asana is understood, all others become, by definition, secondary. Alignment and the knowledge of how to modify an asana must be integrated with the information gathered from our body and our mind, from our history, from our presence on the mat in that moment.

All of this transforms the initial intention into **our intention**, and through alignment into **our expression** of the asana. **Practising on the mat is not performing but being present to our experience.**

Example Trikonasana



Let's go back to our trikonasana. We take as the main intention the lengthening of the hamstrings of the right leg, to which we add keeping the spine straight and opening the torso. These intentions are built upon correct alignment: I cannot think about opening the chest if the arch of the foot is collapsing. We might already have enough work for today — bringing the hand to the floor, to a block, or grabbing the big toe become secondary intentions.

But what if tomorrow I come back to practice and the night before I didn't sleep because the baby's colic kept me awake? If I haven't yet digested that late dinner with my friend Clara? And if my skeletal structure gives my hips a range of motion different from the standard? If I am pregnant?

How do I integrate my life, in its more or less temporary variations, into the practice? By making it an expression of myself — and at least 80% of the intention is not visible from the outside.

Conclusions: the Path Beyond Asana

Ashtanga Grammar does not replace teaching in the traditional Mysore style: the daily life of the shala always sees an asana practice framed by an opening and a closing mantra, the rhythm guided by each practitioner's breath, accompanied by individual hands-on adjustments.

Learning by observing and imitating is the natural starting point — it is how we learn to walk, to talk, to cook. The problem is not imitation, it is staying there without going any deeper. **Ashtanga Grammar** is a tool for doing exactly this: **moving from imitation to understanding.**

In these pages we talked about asana. Just one of the tools of yoga, and often reduced to how they appear from the outside. But presence on the mat is a moment of *svādhyāya**, self-observation in the body in action.

Not performing a posture. Being a posture.

* *svādhyāya* is one of the *niyama* according to the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali (observances or ethical disciplines)

II.32 - *Śauca santoṣa tapas svādhyāya Īśvara-praṇidhānāni niyamāḥ*



The three elements of Ashtanga Grammar are the thread running through everything I teach in the shala and are explored more in depth during the workshops. **Ashtanga Grammar** is a way to go deeper, not a definitive answer, but a way of learning to ask the right questions. Intention, Alignment, Expression: **the compass. The path is yours.**

Un abbraccio e buona pratica.

Namaste

Alan

I am working on the upcoming dates, some in the shala in Pinerolo, some online:

- **Asana Grammar I / II / III — deepening the First Series**
- **Pranayama Grammar I / II / III — Benefits of Yogic Breathing**
- **Vinyasa Transitions Workshop — Jump Back and Jump Through**
- **Handstand Workshop**
- **Yoga Sutra Chanting Workshop**

Any questions or want to know more?

Visiting our small shala in Pinerolo?

Write to me on WhatsApp or by email, you'll find all the contacts at [Ashtanga Marga.com](https://www.ashtanga-marga.com)

If you haven't done so yet, **subscribe to the newsletter** — I'll write as soon as the dates are confirmed.

Ashtanga Grammar
The path unfolds as you walk it.

