

The Concept of Āsana in Classical Yoga

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Abstract

Yoga develops a healthy body and mind. It unlocks the petals of higher consciousness and leads the man beyond the horizon of limitations. Changing our whole being and even the attitude towards our life itself it expands our consciousness to the new possibilities. It aims at enabling us to know our own self with an integrated approach. Building a complete personality, a suitable vessel can be prepared to receive the influx of higher consciousness. Regular and intense practice of different yogic techniques are intended to develop the physical and mental transformation. Āsana plays an important role to strengthen the muscles, joints, ligaments and tendons of the body. Regular practice of āsana maintains the physical body in an optimum condition and promotes health. The dormant energy potential is released and experienced with the increased confidence in each and every stage of life. One cultivates awareness, relaxation, concentration and meditation. There is development of the good physical health by stretching, massaging and stimulating the prāṇic channels and internal organs. The muscles and bones become strong, capacity to absorb oxygen increases with the ability to meet the physical demands during any situation in the day to day life. Sri Aurobindo has said, 'The cup has to be left clean and empty for the divine liquor to be poured into it'. Regular practice of āsana provides a suitable foundation to explore the body and mind for the spiritual awareness.

Keywords: Āsana Yoga, Classical Yoga, Yoga, Concept of Āsana Yoga

Āsana comes from the sānskrit root 'as-'. It means physical posture or the mat to sit on. Hence, āsana is such a physical posture which is done on a mat. The name of āsana is given as per the position of the body. for example, Mayurāsana, Kukuṭāsana, Śasankāsana, etc. Different animals live in harmony being influenced by the posture of the body. They harmonize the nervous system with a gentle massage they improve the functioning of all the internal organs of the body. The respiration and metabolic rates slow down, consumption of oxygen and body temperature drop. Arresting the catabolism, they put specific effects on the glands and internal organs as well as alters the electrochemical activity in the nervous system. There is stimulation as well as control of specific hormonal secretion which helps to reorient our physical appearance, emotional outlook, behavior and attitude towards life. Āsanās coordinate various systems by bringing rhythm and balance into the body-mind complex to attain optimistic health. Free flow of the prāṇa or

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vital energy takes place through the nāḍīs facilitates good health with mental equilibrium and calmness. Automatically a change takes place in breathing, whereas slow, deep and rhythmical breathing indicates calmness and well-being. Practice of āsanas with the breath awareness leads to the mental and emotional equanimity by slowing down the breathing and deepening the pūraka or inhalation and recaka or exhalation. Improvement in the general health of the body automatically helps to bring a positive mental health.

Regular practice of āsana improves coordination, self-awareness and self-confidence. Awareness is an essential part of the āsana practices which can be performed in different ways. With awareness of the physical movements, there is an interaction between various components of the body, i.e., bones, joints, ligaments, muscles etc. It leads to balance and one-pointedness, which harmonizes the physical body. Practice of āsana with breath awareness slows down the movements and relaxes the brain waves. This method of practice has a greater influence at the physical and pranic levels which is useful for harmonizing and revitalizing the body. Flow of the prāṇic energy through the nāḍīs or psychic channels becomes stimulated and balanced. One may feel light, one-pointed, fresh and receptive. Prāṇa or the vital energy pervades the whole body ensuring the health. As the body becomes supple, postures become easy to perform, steadiness and grace of movement takes place. There is a proper integration and harmonization of the body and mind. A suitable chart of āsana, combined with prāṇāyāma, śaṭkarmas, dhyāna and yoga nidrā, is very effective to release the dormant energy. The body becomes full of vitality and strength, and the mind becomes light, creative, joyful and balanced.

Āsanas have been categorized as dynamic and static āsanas. Dynamic āsanas are an essential preparation for static āsanas. Initially, dynamic āsanas are practiced to develop flexibility and control of the body. Then the practice of static āsanas can be commenced to experience some subtle effects on the body. The habit of taking slow and deep breaths is developed, which helps the practitioner to achieve mental and emotional balance. Creating a temporary tension different āsanas stimulate the elimination of toxins from the body. As a result of this the flexibility of the joints takes place with improvement of the health of the muscles. Providing a light massaging effect, they bring about coordination in the nervous system and increase the efficiency of the internal organs. Gradually, the body becomes healthier.

In the ancient scriptures, Vedic literature as well as Upaniṣads description of āsana and its importance in sādhanā is found. In the Tejabindu Upaniṣad, āsana is defined as ‘sukhanaiva bhavet yasmin jasraṁ brahmacintanam’. It means sitting comfortably in which posture one can think of Brahman is āsana. Padmāsana is a classical meditation posture. In Yoga Cuḍāmaṇi Upaniṣad it is described as follows:

padmāsanaṁ samārūhya samakāyaśirodharāḥ I

nāsāgradṛṣṭirekānte japedoṅkāramavyayam II Yoga Cuḍāmaṇi Upaniṣad, verse-71 II

It means sitting properly in Padmāsana, with the head and body straight, fix the attention firmly at the tip of the nose and continuously repeat the mantra, Om in the solitary place. This verse begins at the stage of dhāraṇā or one-pointed concentration,

culminating in dhyāna or meditation. The mind of the aspirant attains equipoise and harmony to experience the Om mantra, which is a symbolic representation of the transcendental state. In this posture, the body is locked firmly in a balanced position with the steadiness of the mind. Balancing the flow of prāṇa it helps to awaken the kuṇḍalinī or supreme psychic energy in the body.

Agni Purāṇa emphasizes āsana as the posture such as ‘lotus’ etc. this helps to maintain the nervous equilibrium and mental poise. One should firmly establish on a seat made of deer skin or kuśa grass in that posture in a śuddha sthāna or pure place. This place is nātyucchritam nātinīcam or neither too high nor too low. Controlling the manaḥ or mind and indriyas or senses one should contemplate on the Supreme Consciousness.

śucau deśe pratiṣṭhāpya vijitāsana āsanam I

tasmin svasthi samāsīna rjukāyaḥ samabhyaset II Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 3/28/8 II

It means in a clean place one should establish in a firm posture, on a seat, not being very high or low. Sitting there, being straight one should practice yoga.

According to Viṣṇu Purāṇa,

ekam bhadrāsanaḍīnām samāsthāya guṇnai ruktaḥ I

yamākhyaair-niyamākhaiśca yuñjīta niyato yatīḥ II Viṣṇu Purāṇa, 6/7/39 II

The yogi should practice yama, niyama, etc., by sitting in Bhadrāsana. It shows that yoga sādhanā is not possible without any āsana.

Lord Kṛṣṇa has said that the yogī should constantly try to keep the mind steady, remaining rahasi or in solitude, ekākī or alone, with yatacittātmā or the mind and the body controlled. He should be free from hope and covetousness. This is nivr̥tti mārga or the path of renunciation where the aspirant is free from hope, desire and greed. This keeps the turbulent indriyas or senses under full control, and one can find perfect solitude as well as peace. Gradually, he acquires the power of discrimination with burning aspiration for the liberation. Then practice of intense dhyāna or meditation and tapas or austerity leads one to attain self-purification and Self-realization. For this he has to find out a suitable place.

śucau deśe pratiṣṭhāpya sthīramāsanamātmanaḥ I

nātyucchritam nātinīcam cailājīnakuśottaram II Bhagavad Gītā, 6/11 II

tatraikāgram manaḥ kṛtvā yatacittendriyakriyaḥ I

upaviśyāsane yuñjyādyogamātmaviśuddhaye II Bhagavad Gītā, 6/12 II

samam kāyaśirogrīvam dhārayannacalam sthiraḥ I

sampreksya nāsikāgram svam diśaścānavalokayan II Bhagavad Gītā, 6/13 II

In a clean place, establishing a firm seat, which is neither too high nor too low, made of a cloth, a skin and kuśa grass, one over the other. One should be firm as a statue or a rock and attain mastery over the āsana by daily practice. A clean place of natural beauty, invigorates and elevates the mind. To practice yoga for the purification of the self, one should upaviśya or sit on it in a comfortable āsana, being motionless with ekāgram manaḥ one-pointed mind by controlling the senses. Through silent meditation he can calm down the bubbling emotions, sentiments, instincts and impulses. During the practice the trunk, head and neck should be straight and still, gazing at the nose tip, without looking around.

Āsana means a state of being in which one can remain physically and mentally steady, calm, quiet and comfortable. Maharṣi Patañjali has defined āsana as ‘sthiram sukham āsanam II YS 2/46 II’. It means āsana is that position which is comfortable and steady. A state of equilibrium takes place with perfect firmness of the body, steadiness of the mind and development of the spirit. Perfection in an āsana is achieved when the effort to perform it becomes effortless and the infinite being within is reached. In Yoga Sūtra it is defined as ‘prayatnaśaithilyānantasamāpattibhyām II YS 2/47 II’. One needs to cultivate perseverance, alertness and insight. Gradually a state of balance, attention, extension, diffusion and relaxation takes place within the body and mind. The practitioner can be considered firm in his posture with relaxation by maintaining this firmness. Mind becomes sensitized of the inner psychic field being immersed in the boundless state of infinite bliss. About the result of its practice Maharṣi Patañjali has defined that ‘tato dvandvānabhighātaḥ II YS 2/48 II’. It means the regular practice of āsana increases our resistance power to overcome the disturbance and hindrance caused by the dvandvās. The spiritual aspirant cultivates a high level of resistance by the regular practice of āsana.

Each āsana has five functions to perform. These are conative, cognitive, mental, intellectual and spiritual. Conative action is the exertion of the organs of action. Cognitive action is the perception of the results of that action. Then the mental faculty guides the organs of action and perception to perform the āsanās more correctly. The rhythmic flow of energy and awareness is experienced throughout the psychic channels of the body. A pure state of joy takes place with the manifestation of dhāraṇā or concentration and dhyāna or meditation in the practice of āsana. Dhāraṇā is focusing of the attention on the chosen point or area within the body as well as outside. When the attentive awareness of the consciousness is unbroken, this is dhyāna.

haṭhasya prathamāṅgatvādāsanam pūrvamucyate I

kuryāttadāsanam sthairyamārogyam cāṅgalāghavam II Haṭha Pradīpikā, 1/17 II

Prior to everything, āsana is spoken of as the first limb of hatha yoga. By the practice of āsana one attains steadiness of body and mind, freedom from disease and lightness of the limbs. Āsana is a specific position which opens the energy channels and psychic centers. Purification and control of the body take place by restructuring the prāṇic flows. With the regular practice of āsana, steadiness develops, prāṇa or vital energy moves freely and the resistance power of the body increases. The body becomes supple and easily one can bend and stretch himself in a relaxed manner due to a greater vibration of the prāṇa. When the body gets controlled through the practice of āsana, automatically the mind is controlled.

The yogic tradition emphasizes that there are eighty-four lakhs of āsanās. In Gorakha Ṣaṭaka it is found that, “Every one of the eighty-four lakhs of āsanās has been told by Śiva. Of these, eighty-four āsanās have been selected, out of which two are important. Swami Swatmārām has described in Haṭha Pradīpikā some of the āsanās accepted by munis such as Vaśiṣṭha and yogis such as Matsyendrānāth. According to him “Siddhāsana, Padmāsana, Simhāsana and Bhadrāsana are the four main āsanās.

The sādḥaka or spiritual aspirant should always sit in Siddhāsana, because it is the best of the āsanas.” II 1/38 II. Siddhāsana purifies the seventy-two nāḍīs, harmonizes the energy level by equalizing the mental and prāṇic forces in the body.

ātmadhyāyī mitāhārī yāvadvādaśavatsaram I

sadā siddhāsanābhyāsādyogī niṣpattimāpnuyāt II Haṭha Pradīpikā, 1/40 II

It means the yogī who is brahmacārī or meditates on the self or ātmā, mitāhārī or takes moderate and pure food, tyāgī or performs renunciation and practices Siddhāsana for twelve years, attains perfection or siddhi. When the flow of prāṇa is stabilized, the breath stops spontaneously (kevala kumbhaka) and a mindless state (unmani) arises by itself. Similarly, Padmāsana is referred as the destroys all the diseases and leads one to attain liberation. The siddhas, call Bhadrāsana as Gorakṣāsana. Matsyendrāsana is described by Śrī Matsyendrānāth, which increases the digestive fire to such an incredible capacity that it is the means of eradicating health disorders as well as awakening of kuṇḍalinī or the supreme psychic energy by bringing equilibrium in the bindu visarga. Swami Swatmārām has emphasized that Paścimottāsana is the best among āsanas. It stretches the whole spinal column and central nervous system through which suṣumnā runs. The practitioner becomes free from diseases and the prāṇic impulses pass directly up to the higher psychic centers. The digestive fire increases, removal of excess fat from abdomen and thighs takes place. Regarding Mayūrāsana he has described that it quickly alleviates all diseases like enlargement of the glands, dropsy and other stomach disorders. It rectifies imbalance of the doṣas or humors (vāta, pitta & kapha). Practice of Mayūrāsana promotes digestion and elimination of toxins so that kālākūṭa or poisonous substances are not circulated in the body and kindles the jatharāgni or gastric fire. Śavāsana removes śrānti or tiredness and cittaviśrāntikārakam or enables the mind to relax.

Sage Gheraṇḍa described that āsanas make the body strong and stable after insuring complete control over the body. With the regular practice of this one attains a stage in which there is no physical discomfort. In verse number ten of the first chapter in Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā he has said that āsanene bhaveddṛḍham. It means by practicing āsanas, physical strength and firmness is achieved. Here firmness or strength means physical capacity, inner strength and gaining good health. In the second chapter sage Gheraṇḍa introduces the king, Caṇḍakāpālī taught of thirty-two āsanas for stability of the body.

āsanāni samasthāni yāvanto jīvajantavaḥ I

caturaśīti lakṣāṇi śivana kathitāni ca II Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā, 2/1 II

teṣāṁ madhye viśiṣṭāni ṣoḍaśonaṁ śataṁ kṛtam I

teṣāṁ madhye martyaloke dvāntriśadāsanāṁ śubham II Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā, 2/2 II

It means the number of āsana is the same as the number of animal species in the world. Lord Śiva described eighty-four lakhs āsanas. Out of those eighty-four are important, and of these, thirty-two have been considered as auspicious in this martyaloke or mortal world. He started the description of āsanas with Siddhāsana or the accomplished pose and perfection of which is mokṣakavāṭabhedanakaram or opens

the door to mokṣa or liberation. Practice of Padmāsana is vyādhivikāranāśanakaram or eradicates all diseases and is helpful in achieving physical as well as mental stability with peace. Śavāsana is named as Mṛtāsana according to sage Gheraṇḍa, which removes fatigue and relaxes the mind. Makarāsana activates the vital energy in the body and Bhujāṅgāsana destroys all diseases by increasing the fire of the body and awakens the bhujaṅgīdevī or kuṇḍalinī śakti.

Śrīnivāsa Yogī has described in Haṭharatnāvalī that the almighty Śambhū has described eighty-four āsanās, taking examples from each lakh of the eighty-four lakhs of species. In the modern yogic perspective, his major contribution is in the form of āsanās. While considering aṣṭāṅgayoga, he talks about āsana as the first component of haṭha yoga. He gives the list of eight-four āsanās, but explained the technique of thirty-six āsanās. Among these āsanās, ten are considered important, which are Svastika, Gomukha, Padma, Vīra, Siddhāsana, Mayūra, Kukkuṭa, Bhadra, Simhāsana and Muktāsana. Out of these four (Siddhāsana, Padmāsana, Simhāsana and Bhadrāsana) are most excellent ones. Siddhāsana is the best among these four, which one should always adopt. In the list he has mentioned four types of Padmāsana, six types of Mayūrāsana, three types of Kūrmāsana, and five types of Kukkuṭāsana. While attributing certain therapeutic effects of various yogic practices, he has explained that āsanās contribute to stability, health and efficient body. Bhadrāsana, Phaṇīndrāsana and Padmāsana remove all the diseases and toxins. Mayūrāsana eradicates diseases of the spleen, stomach, balances the three humors in the body, digests excess food and stimulates the gastric fire. Matsyendrāsana enhances the gastric fire, removes severe diseases and brings stability to the spine. Paścimottānāsana stimulates the gastric fire, reduces the belly and brings good health. Regarding the importance of āsana, it is mentioned as follows:

athāsane dṛḍhe yogī vaśī hitamitāsanaḥ I

gurūpadiṣṭamārgeṇaprāṇāyāman samabhyaset II Haṭharatnāvalī, 3/78 II

It means having attained perfection in āsana, a yogī, who is self-restrained and who consumes wholesome and moderate food, should undertake the practice of prāṇāyāma, as instructed by the guru or spiritual master. In order to fulfil the requirements of steadiness and a straight back, neck and head, the classical meditation postures (Siddhāsana, Padmāsana, Vajrāsana, etc.) are best.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be concluded that āsana exercise a profound influence on the mind-body complex. It is an integral part of yoga techniques which leads us towards the higher awareness. It transcends the normal limitations of the mind and body for self-realization. However, specific guidelines should be observed during the āsana practice. The muscle can be slowly and gradually stretched, so that it can eventually extend well beyond its normal limitations. This elongation squeezes out stagnant blood and allows it to be replaced by oxygenated blood when the muscle resumes its normal shape. It is important to relax the muscles during and after āsana practice, particularly after dynamic āsanās. The aim is to slow down the breathing rate

to improve the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the lungs as well as to induce mental tranquility. Cakras or psychic centers are stimulated, nāḍīs or the psychic channels are regulated and purified to channelize the prāṇa or psychic energy throughout the body. Finally, the spiritual aspirant attains a complete personality with physical health, mental wellbeing and spiritual development.

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