

Significance of Various Āsanas in Yoga philosophy: Positive Influence on Health.

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Abstract

In the Yoga Philosophy, *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. Without *āsana* one individual may not stay fit, so it is essential for every individual to practice *āsana* every day for mental as well as physical health.

Keywords: *āsanas*, Yoga philosophy, Positive Influence, Health

In the yoga Philosophy, there are eight parts of Yoga described in a very systematic way. *āsana* is very important aspect of Yoga, which 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*, *Kuṭṭāsana*, *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. *āsanas* coordinate various systems by bringing rhythm and balance into the body-mind complex to attain optimistic health. Free flow of the *prāṇa* or 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*, *śatkarmas*, *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 *āsana*s stimulate the elimination of toxins from the body.

In the Indian 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 samakāyaśirodharah /

nāsāgradrṣṭirekānte japedoṅkāramavyayam // 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 /

tasmin svasthi samāsīna ṛjukāyaḥ samabhyaset // Bhāgavata Purāṇa, III/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.

In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* it is said as under:

ekaṁ bhadrāsanaḍīnām samāsthāya guṇnai ruktaḥ /

yamākhayair-niyamākhaiśca yuñjīta niyato yatīḥ // 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 *nivṛtti 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 sthiramāsanamātmanaḥ /
nātyucchritaṁ nātinīcarṁ cailājīnakuśottaram // Bhagavad Gītā, 6/11 II
tatraikāgramṁ manaḥ kṛtvā yatacittendriyakriyaḥ /
upaviśyāsane yuñjyādyogamātmaviśuddhaye // Bhagavad Gītā, 6/12 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 *ekāgramṁ 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. Maḥarṣi 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 the 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 Mahārṣi Patañjali has defined that ‘*tato dvandvānabhighātaḥ* || YS 2/48 ||’. 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 *āsanas* 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 prathamāṅgatvādāsanaṁ pūrvamucyate /

kuryāttadāsanaṁ sthairyamārogyaṁ cāṅgalāghavam // Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, 1/17 ||

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

sadā siddhāsanābhyāsādyogī niṣpattimāpnuyāt // Haṭha Yoga 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 *Goraḥāsana*. *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 *kālakūṭa* or poisonous substances are not circulated in the body and kindles the *jatharāgni* or gastric fire. *Śavāsana* removes *śrānti* or tiredness and *cittaviśrāntikāraṅgam* or enables the mind to relax.

The great 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.

āsanaṇi samasthāni yāvanto jīvajantavaḥ /

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

teṣāṁ madhye viśiṣṭāni ṣoḍaśonaṁ śataṁ kṛtam /

teṣāṁ madhye martyaloke dvāntrīśadāsanam śubham // 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 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 *bhujāṅgīdevī* or *kuṇḍalinī śakti*.

Śrīnivāsa Yogī has described in *Haṭharatnāvalī* that the almighty Śambhū has described eighty-four *āsanas*, 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 *āsanas*. While considering *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, he talks about *āsana* as the first component of *haṭha yoga*. He gives the list of eight-four *āsanas*, but explained the technique of thirty-six *āsanas*. Among these *āsanas*, 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 *āsanas* 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.

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 *āsanas*. 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. However, it can be said that the *āsanas* are really important for every human being. So, by practicing these remains fit and healthy and may enjoy a very stable and comfortable life.

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