

Yogic Postures

Mira Mehta

Within the vast and complex subject of Yoga one aspect has come to such prominence in modern times that it is popularly understood to be the subject itself: the practice of asanas or postures.

In this article we present an overview of asana and its place in the scheme of the wider philosophy and practice of Yoga. We present classical definitions and evaluations and a brief historical survey. Subsequent articles will focus on particular groups of asanas, describing their main features and relevance to health. An attempt will be made to explain the principles underlying them.

Definitions

Asana (strictly speaking *aasana*), 'posture' is the fifth of eight organs of Yoga enumerated in a systematic, definitive work on Yoga, the *Yoga Sutra*, composed roughly two millennia ago by Patanjali. The eight together engage all the various faculties of a human being in spiritual endeavour. Before asana come ethical restraints (*yama*) and mental and physical observances (*niyama*); after it come breath control (*pranayama*), sensory control (*pratyahara*) and concentration and meditation (*dharana* and *dhyana*) culminating in a state in which the meditator identifies totally with the object of meditation, losing all sense of self (*samadhi*).

In defining asana Patanjali notes four aspects: steadiness (*sthira*), ease (*sukha*), cessation of effort (*prayatnashaithilya*) and contemplation of the infinite (with a double meaning of contemplation of the serpent god supporting the world) (*anantasamapatti*) (YS II.46-47).

Asana as a sitting posture for meditation

Sanskrit words are derived from verbal roots, and the root of asana is 'aas', meaning to sit, lie, be, rest, abide, remain, be in a state. The noun *aasana* means a seat and also a particular posture or a mode of sitting. In the Yogic tradition two meanings of the word are understood. The first is asana as a seat or sitting posture for meditation. A famous passage in the *Bhagavad Gita* describes a Yogin's practice. He should set up a seat (*aasana*) for himself made of cloth, deer-skin and grass; then,

"having ensconced himself on the seat and made his mind one-pointed, restraining his mind and senses he should practice Yoga for the purification of the soul."(BG VI.12)

By convention a number of specific sitting postures such as *padmasana*, the lotus pose, or *svastikasana*, the simple cross-legged position, are understood as the postures for meditation.

Asanas unrelated to seated meditation

The second meaning of asana involves its usage in the plural, signifying yogic postures of various types, not restricted to sitting. As early as the 4th century AD a major commentator on Patanjali's treatise on Yoga lists a dozen postures or so by name (VB on YS II.46). Following a historical trend towards the written elaboration of practices, manuals giving brief instructions for many more appear in medieval times (e.g.HYP ch.1). Along with these directives health benefits and curative properties of asanas are mentioned in differing degrees of detail. A typical example is the description of the peacock pose (*mayurasana*):

“Place the palms of both the hands on the ground, and place the navel on both the elbows and balancing thus, the body should be stretched backward like a stick. This is called *mayurasana*. This asana soon destroys all diseases, and removes abdominal disorders, and those arising from irregularities of phlegm, bile and wind, digests unwholesome food taken in excess, increases appetite and destroys the most deadly poison.” (HYP I.32-33)

In the modern era the thrust towards the detailing of all investigations in a scientific manner has generated many substantial works on Yoga giving prominence to the elucidation of asanas. The most notable among them is *Light on Yoga* by B.K.S. Iyengar which gives a systematic presentation of over two hundred asanas, covering both techniques and effects. Because of its precision, comprehensiveness and elucidatory approach his methodology has been influential worldwide. To continue with the example of the peacock pose:

“Kneel on the floor with the knees slightly apart. Bend forward, invert the palms and place them on the floor. The little fingers should touch and the fingers should point towards the feet...Exhale, bear the body weight on the wrists and hands, raise the legs from the floor (either one by one or together) and at the same time stretch the trunk and head forward. Keep the whole body parallel to the floor with the legs stretched out straight and the feet together...This asana tones up the abdominal portion of the body wonderfully. Due to the pressure of the elbows against the abdominal aorta, blood circulates properly in the abdominal organs. This improves digestive power, cures ailments of the stomach and spleen, and prevents the accumulation of toxins due to faulty eating habits...It also strengthens the forearms, wrists and elbows...” (LOY, posture 127)

Yoga as a naturopathic and prophylactic method

The practice of asanas has thus historically been recognised as both a natural healing method and a preventative measure against ailments. This appreciation continues today, and there is room for modern, systematic research studies to build on those hitherto undertaken sporadically (see *Yoga and Health*, August 1999). Similarly the beneficial effect of Yoga practice on the health of the mind is well known, and, indeed, the definition of Yoga is mental control:

“Yoga is the restraint of the modes of mind” (YS I.2)

Classification of asanas

Broadly, asanas can be categorised according to body placement and type of movement. There are standing poses, sitting poses, lateral twists, supine and prone poses, inverted poses, balances, backbends and series of poses linked by jumps (see *Yoga: The Iyengar Way*). Each group possesses characteristic features and distinct physical and psychological benefits, although individual asanas may differ from the generality in particular respects. There are also some asanas which defy easy classification.

Works cited

Information about the Sanskrit works may be found in the Philosophy section.

YS – *The Yoga Suutras of Patanjali*

VB – *The Vyaasa Bhaashya* (the earliest and main commentary on the Yoga Sutras by Vyaasa)

BG – *The Bhagavad Gita*

HYP – *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika* by Svaatmaraama

LOY – *Light on Yoga* by B.K.S. Iyengar

YTIW – *Yoga: The Iyengar Way* by Silva, Mira & Shyam Mehta

References

Physiological and Therapeutic Studies on Yoga by R.H. Singh, R.M. Shettiwar & K.N. Udupa, reprinted in *Yoga & Health* magazine, August 1999

[Key to the spelling of Sanskrit words: aa= long a, as in *far*; ii= long I, as in *deep*, uu=long u, as in *soup*]

© Mira Mehta