



ASANAS

3rd Limb of Yoga

Philosophy Lesson with Nina

What is Asana?

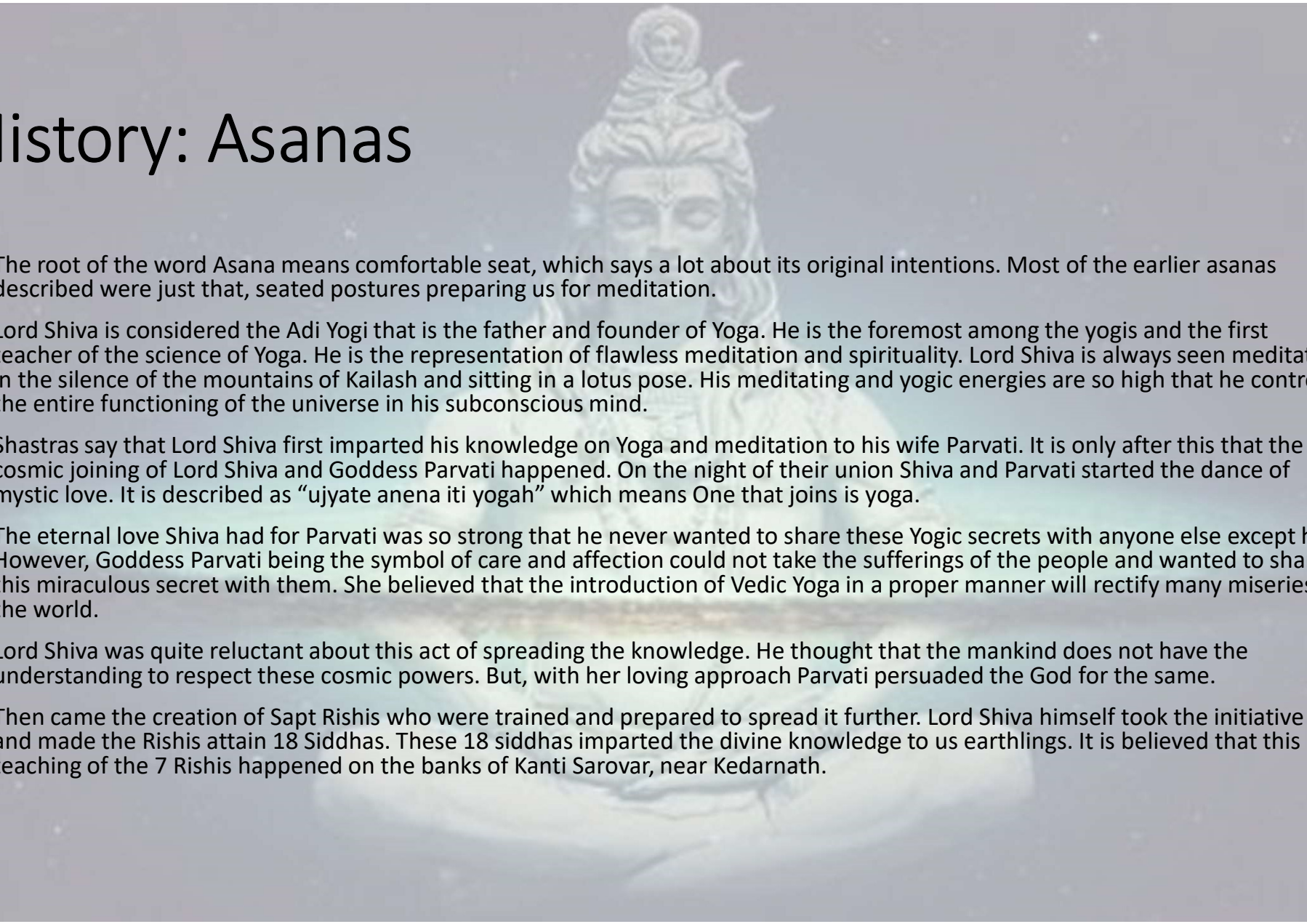
Asana doesn't refer to the ability to perform a hand stand or an aesthetically impressive backbend, the root of the word Asana means comfortable 'seat' – specifically the seat you would take for the practice of meditation.

Most of the earlier asanas described were just that, seated postures preparing us for meditation.

While traditional texts like the Hatha Yoga Pradipika list many postures such as Padmasana (lotus pose) and Virasana (hero pose) suitable for meditation, this text also tells us that the most important posture is in fact “sthira sukham asanam” – meaning, ‘a posture the practitioner can hold comfortably and motionlessness’ – the only alignment instruction Patanjali gives for this Asana.

The idea is to be able to sit in comfort so we're not 'pulled' by aches and pains of the body, or restlessness due to an uncomfortable position. Perhaps this is something to consider in your next yoga class if you always tend to choose the 'advanced' posture offered, rather than the one your body is able to attain: “In how many poses are we really comfortable and steady?”

History: Asanas



- The root of the word Asana means comfortable seat, which says a lot about its original intentions. Most of the earlier asanas described were just that, seated postures preparing us for meditation.
- Lord Shiva is considered the Adi Yogi that is the father and founder of Yoga. He is the foremost among the yogis and the first teacher of the science of Yoga. He is the representation of flawless meditation and spirituality. Lord Shiva is always seen meditating in the silence of the mountains of Kailash and sitting in a lotus pose. His meditating and yogic energies are so high that he controls the entire functioning of the universe in his subconscious mind.
- Shastras say that Lord Shiva first imparted his knowledge on Yoga and meditation to his wife Parvati. It is only after this that the cosmic joining of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati happened. On the night of their union Shiva and Parvati started the dance of mystic love. It is described as “ujyate anena iti yogah” which means One that joins is yoga.
- The eternal love Shiva had for Parvati was so strong that he never wanted to share these Yogic secrets with anyone else except her. However, Goddess Parvati being the symbol of care and affection could not take the sufferings of the people and wanted to share this miraculous secret with them. She believed that the introduction of Vedic Yoga in a proper manner will rectify many miseries of the world.
- Lord Shiva was quite reluctant about this act of spreading the knowledge. He thought that the mankind does not have the understanding to respect these cosmic powers. But, with her loving approach Parvati persuaded the God for the same.
- Then came the creation of Sapt Rishis who were trained and prepared to spread it further. Lord Shiva himself took the initiative and made the Rishis attain 18 Siddhas. These 18 siddhas imparted the divine knowledge to us earthlings. It is believed that this teaching of the 7 Rishis happened on the banks of Kanti Sarovar, near Kedarnath.

The Science of Asanas



The science of asanas is known as hatha yoga. “Ha” means sun, “ta” means moon. The first process of yoga is to bring balance between the masculine and feminine in you. Otherwise there will be no scaling of consciousness. This is why Shiva is known as Ardhanarishvara – one half of him is a woman, another half of him is a man. He is a man and the very embodiment of manhood. At the same time, he is also woman, because without bringing this balance, without cultivating these two dimensions within us, there is no reaching towards the peak, there is no question of a human being flowering to his fullest possibility. That is why the first dimension of yoga that you practice is hatha yoga. That means the yoga of the sun and the moon is bringing balance between the masculine and the feminine. That is the first step to take.

Why we practice Asanas



- Whether we remember it during our daily life or not, we are a union. The body and the mind are not separated, and the health of one affects the other. We cannot just work the body and expect to be healthy if the mind is not strong and balanced.
- You cannot think destructive thoughts or feed your mind unhealthy things and expect the body to shine, no matter how much you do asana practice. The body will not reach its optimum state of being without the support of the mind, and vice versa.
- In the yogic view, the body is a temple of spirit, the care of which is an important stage of our spiritual growth. Through the practice of asanas, we develop the habit of discipline and the ability to concentrate, both of which are necessary for meditation. Asana practice works the physical body so the mind has a healthy and peaceful place to reside. Since the last stage of yoga is Samadhi, union with the Whole, we cannot reach it if all of our attention is going to the physical body. If the body is not healthy, if the muscles are pulling and the legs are aching, if the body is not strong or relaxed, it'll be more difficult to concentrate, meditate and find a place of blissful connection.
- According to Patanjali, Asana aims to keep the body steady and easy for the meditation practice that prepares us to gain mastery of the thought patterns of the mind so that self-realization can be experienced. Yogasanas are different ways to shape our body; when we step into a pose we are creating a certain flow of energy. Gary Kraftsow, calls them "prana pumps." Prana is awareness, and often equated with "energy" of life force." Each shape has a different effect on our prana, and postures can be sequenced in a multitude of ways to support the practitioner in physical, energetic, mental, and emotional health.

Sthira Sukham Asanam



- Patanjali encourages us to find a place in our practice that is filled with ease while being steady and stable.
- The most important and in fact the only description of asana given in the Yoga Sutras is “sthira sukham asanam”, meaning that every asana should be ‘STEADY’ and ‘COMFORTABLE’ – STHIRA and SUKHA.
- Sthira = steady, stable, grounded or strong
- Sukha = comfortable, easy or peaceful
- Seeking this equilibrium is what it’s all about.
- Postures are a balancing act – strength and ease, between trying and not trying, between do and not do.
- Next time you are in a challenging pose, observe yourself and your breath. Are you feeling steady and easy, is your breath long and steady? If you cannot hold a pose with these qualities, take it down a notch, give yourself some time, do more prep poses and let yourself develop.
- It’s about finding the balance between healthy challenge and comfort zone in order for us to grow.

Finding your way into the present



Asana practice reinforces the connection between the mind and the body, and we can use the body as a tool for getting into the present moment. The body is always in the present moment, regardless where the mind wanders.

Tuning into the body gives us a chance to tune into the moment, to quiet the mind, to use the breath and remind us of the alignment between the body and the mind. When we practice asana, we don't just exercise the body on its own while engaging the mind elsewhere. Instead we are moving as one unified whole, trying to centre the mind.

And honestly, isn't asana practice the perfect tool for relaxing the mind? If you want to relax and just be, lay there in a perfect harmony with yourself and the world; when have you ever reached this state of bliss easier than in Savasana? When the body is moved and relaxed, the mind is clear, the thoughts are distant and you just feel whole.

Essentially, what happens on your yoga mat is for you. It is your practice, it is your body and it is your journey.

Therefore the most important alignment is not about your physical body, but how you experience yourself in the poses and what the poses do for your inner alignment.

It's all about how it feels and not how it looks

Asana practice is not about how you look, but how you feel -Kaisa Kapanen

- There is no such thing as the perfect yoga pose. Our bodies change from day to day (prakriti).
- What's important is, does your student feel safe? Are the muscles that are supposed to be stretching, stretching, and the muscles that are supposed to be engaging, engaging? If yes is the answer, then it's already perfect. Only the student will know how it feels, it's not observable from the outside 😊

