



The Role of Asana

The third of the eight *angas* (limbs or stages) of Patanjali's classical yoga system, also called *ashtanga yoga* – yoga with 8 (*asta*) parts (*anga*), is *asana* or posture, which is the basis for the practice of the higher stages (*pranayama, dharana, dhyana, samadhi*).

Yoga involves the use of special body positions related to certain attitudes of mind. The Sanskrit word *asana* has been translated as “pose” or “posture,” to emphasize that it is not a simple physical exercise or gymnastic activity, but simultaneously involves the participation of the consciousness and of the mind to perform it.

In the ancient treatise of Patanjali, the *Yoga Sutras*, *asana* is defined by three aspects, the first of which is also the best known:

2:46 The posture is immobile, firm, and comfortable.

2:47 It is achieved when effort disappears and there is meditation on the infinite.

2:48 From now on, he (the yogi) is no longer disturbed by dualities.

From this short description, one can easily see that the purpose of practicing *asanas* is primarily spiritual. The posture aims to create a state of stable equilibrium, in which the yogi is not affected by the pairs of opposites, and this occurs on many levels: physical, emotional, psychological, and mental.⁵³

Therefore, in order to perform an *asana* correctly, it is necessary to meet several requirements:

Find a position that we can maintain firmly, without moving for a sufficient amount of time

Be relaxed and feel comfortable in that position

Perform it without effort

Have a proper mental attitude

Breathe calmly and quietly

Meditate upon the infinite (the ultimate reality of our being, the Spiritual Heart).

When we adopt a posture, there are many levels of awareness and experimentation, ranging from the purely physical to the most refined aspects of mind and being.

A) THE PHYSICAL LEVEL – RELAXATION AND STRETCHING

This is the most easily accessible level and also the one that we start with. Yoga cultivates a different attitude towards the body and the way it is involved in the practice of a posture.





Unlike physical effort (specific to sports, for example), where the muscles are in a constant oscillation between contraction and relaxation, yoga cultivates a special state of the muscles that is called “stretching” (as André Van Lysebeth defines it). In this state ***the muscles are very relaxed and, at the same time, stretched beyond their ordinary limits.***

When one performs a move that stretches a muscle, at some point it will tend to resist the movement, having a kind of defensive reaction to what it feels could become its “breaking” point. As a result, the muscle will allow that movement up to a point, remaining relaxed, after which it will oppose the movement by contracting.

Therefore, our level of flexibility also depends on the limit at which the muscles begin to react defensively and resist the movements that we make.

Yoga postures often seem to be difficult because they are approached with the attitude of an athlete, which, as we have seen, leads to a contraction of the muscles and thereby to a decrease in flexibility.

Relaxation

To overcome these limitations, we need to learn to relax the body as much as possible when practicing an *asana*. Only the muscles that are needed to perform the posture remain contracted, and even these are in a state of semi-tension. For the rest of the muscles, one aims to attain a deep muscular relaxation, and an awareness of the areas that feel most strained or contracted.

Therefore, ***we enter the posture as slowly and smoothly as possible, avoiding any sudden or jerky movements.*** Forced movements lead to spontaneous contraction and lack of elasticity. We do not rush. We take all the time necessary to enter into a pose (and come out of it). Using this slow stretching to reach the desired position will allow us to maintain a state of relaxation.⁵⁴

Avoid sudden movements

It is also important to protect the relaxed muscles from any sudden movements. They are in a “vulnerable” position when we relax and stretch them at the same time. Jerking or forcing, in these situations, can have unpleasant effects on the body.

We get to the best position through a very slow and relaxed movement, with periods of immobility, throughout the range of motion, in which we seek to emphasize muscle relaxation.

When we reach the final stage of the *asana*, we remain as immobile as possible. Once in the final position, any movement will cause the muscles to contract once again.

Not just “doing” the *asana*, but “being” the *asana*

Asana involves a state of immobility and firm stability. “To do” implies an action, a movement, and therefore a contraction, which is opposite to what we aim for, in Hridaya Yoga, through the practice of postures.



Therefore, we can say that the *asana* is not “done,” but “lived.” The immobility allows us to gradually experience levels beyond bodily sensations and to live the spiritual experience that the pose offers.

Levels in performing an *asana*

There are several levels in performing an *asana* in terms of physical immobility:

a. Beginner – immobility maintained for 1-2 minutes.

It is the minimum time required for a body position to become an *asana* and not just a physical activity.

b. Intermediate – semi-endurance, which means maintaining immobility for 2-5 minutes. This level is reached gradually, by adding 30 seconds every day (or less, in the case of some *asanas*).

It is important not to make any movements, not even of the eyes. This is because it is actually not the body that wants to move, but the mind. There is a strong correlation between body and mind and therefore the immobile posture has a direct effect of calming the mind and placing it in a state conducive to spiritual experiences.

c. Advanced – endurance work involving immobility maintained for 5 to 15 minutes. It is important to progress to this level gradually. In some postures it is harder to maintain immobility towards the end of this time interval and therefore an effort of will is needed, the witnessing attitude is always maintained.

d. Mastery – involves immobilization for long periods of time.

(Of course, the times mentioned in the different levels of performing an *asana* are just relative, and the levels are given only as a general perspective. This is because there are *asanas* that can be maintained quite easy for long periods of time, and *asanas* that require a lot of practice and determination in order to be held for 5 minutes.)⁵⁵

B) THE ENERGETIC LEVEL

Another level of perception is that of specific energetic arousals. Each *asana* influences and facilitates the flow of *prana*, vital energy, in the body, regulates and purifies energy or pranic channels, called *nadis*, and stimulates psychic centers, called *chakras*. Some *asanas* are geared towards awakening *kundalini shakti*, the evolutionary energy in man, and illuminating the higher centers of human consciousness. More details on *chakras*, *nadis*, and *kundalini* are offered in the course on the subtle physiology of yoga.

C) THE MENTAL LEVEL

There is a very strong correlation between body and mind, they are not separate entities, but have a mutual influence on each other. Recent discoveries in neurosciences and different fields of therapy confirmed that ***memories, emotions and experiences are held in the tissues of the body. These are “written” onto the***



nervous system and even encoded in movement patterns. Yoga *asana* is a means to release what is being held, to shift patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior (**samskaras**, as they are called in yogic terms) that are no longer healthy, and exchange them for healthier ones.

The Symbolic Integration of the Asana

The postures of the body, traditionally named after animals, plants, legendary heroes, archetypal geometric forms or divine beings etc., are translated in mental attitudes and integrated symbolically by the psyche, helping to restore the mind's natural flexibility, balance and openness.

Relaxation and Quietness

A mind habituated to agitation, rigidity and tension prevents the body from being able to remain relaxed and motionless. A relaxed and immobile body encourages the mind to become relaxed and focused. Patanjali defines yoga, at the beginning of his famous work the **Yoga Sutras**, as the "cessation of the fluctuations of the mind."

Therefore, the state of yoga involves a motionless, relaxed mind, without any fluctuations, and this is made possible also by remaining immobile in a posture. **Asana** involves body and mind simultaneously. It is therefore necessary to encourage the mind to remain in a specific and pure state or attitude.

This specific and pure state is an Open Attention, an attitude of witnessing with detachment the "events" that occur in our being on several levels. It is a passive, non-active state of mind, nevertheless intense and vigilant.

For many, "the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind" is a state synonymous with lack of any mental activity. In fact, it is a state in which the mind remains quiet, without reacting to what it perceives. It merely observes and helps us to be aware of the inner realities, starting with bodily sensations and going to the perception of ourselves as the divine essence, as the immortal Self, *atman*. Therefore, the quietness of the mind is the proper attitude when an *asana* is practiced.

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The "mental posture"

So, the "mental posture" is an attitude that accompanies us throughout the whole performance of the physical posture. From the moment we begin to position ourselves in the *asana*, the mind begins to act as an observer.

Open Attention





If, while we enter the pose, the mind still retains a semi-active role, commanding the relaxation of the muscles and the positioning of the body, then during the immobility of the body, the mind has to remain passive (not at all drowsy or inert, but remaining attentive and vigilant without “reacting” to what it perceives).

a. First, it observes the body and the sensations that come from it: the state of the various muscles, pressure of the body on the ground, possible tensions, the way the body parts come in contact.

b. It can observe the natural flow of the breath which deepens the state of relaxation, both physical and mental. Focusing on the breath calms the mind.

c. It can be aware of some energetic arousals, more subtle sensations like warm or ice-cold vibrations or fine electricity-like currents through the body.

d. It can notice some emotional echoes of the pose, changes in disposition or even the quality of the mind, as the body adopts that specific form and the posture unfolds its subtle psychosomatic “message.”

D) THE SPIRITUAL LEVEL

A deeper level of participation in the performance of an *asana* is that of consciousness. It is the level where “we exist” in that posture, a level that unifies all aspects of body, mind, breath, energizing, etc. This is in fact the level of the “Seer” as defined by the third affirmation in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali: The Seer (the Witness Consciousness, the Spiritual Heart) is revealed when the mind is free from fluctuations.

Thus, the Witness Consciousness, the Spiritual Heart, is revealed as the essential center of our being, as what we really are. The limiting sensation of the body fades (through that state of expansion into infinity, defined by Patanjali in Chapter 2, *Sutra* 47: [*asana*] “is achieved when effort disappears and there is meditation on the infinite).”

The duality, interior/exterior (and the other pairs of opposites), is removed and therefore the conditions are created for the ecstatic experience of cosmic consciousness (*samadhi*) to occur.

Finally, the posture (*asana*) becomes the support for the revelation of the Self, the divine reality of the essence of our being.

Awareness

To be aware is synonymous with knowing and living Reality, to live in Reality and not in illusion.

Asanas and other more advanced yoga techniques lead us into the deepest dimension of our being, the one about which the great spiritual traditions say it is the only reality: the Self, the Spiritual Heart, *atman*. Therefore, to be aware is a fundamental condition of a life lived in the fullness of the human potential.⁵⁷

Approaching an *asana* involves a full awareness of our entire being, of everything that happens inside: how the subtle energies are activated and the profound states of consciousness that occur.





It is not enough to focus, to restrict our attention to one aspect. It is necessary to embrace everything, to feel ourselves as a harmonious whole, a perfect unity that has, as its center, the Spiritual Heart.

From the deep silence of the eternal witness, the Self, we notice the transformations that occur during the performance of an *asana* and their echoes throughout our being.

Through awareness, we enjoy everything that a yoga technique can offer.

We feel the energetic levels that characterize the *chakras* and we can enter in the spiritual domains corresponding to the *chakra* which is activated by the *asana*.

In this way, in an *asana* we gradually enter into meditation on that intimate reality that is our real essence and that unites us with all.

Indications of success in the practice of Hatha Yoga

In the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, a fundamental text of hatha yoga, Swami Svatmarama establishes the practice of *asana* as foremost in hatha yoga:

1:17 Prior to everything, *asana* is spoken of as the first part of hatha yoga.

Having done *asana*, one attains steadiness of body and mind, freedom from disease and lightness of the limbs.

1:78 The body becomes lean, the face glows with delight, *Anahata-nada* (the most subtle inner sound), manifests and eyes are clear, the body is healthy, the *bindu* is under control (i.e. control over the creative energy), the increase of the inner fire, the *nadis* (energy channels) are purified, such are the signs of success in hatha yoga.

Also, the famous Tantric text *Tattva Yoga* states in aphorism number 132: "If we guide our practice according to the methods of *hatha yoga*, it always leads to the same results with an extraordinary accuracy, regardless of the faith we have

