

(ASANA) POSTURE IN HATHA-YOGA

Asanas and *pranayama* which are third and fourth limb of the eight limbed path that forms the backbone of Hatha-Yoga. They are: postures (*asana*) aimed at attaining mastery over the body, and breath control (*pranayama*) the power over our vital energy, which is our breath (Varenne 111-4). The goal of *pranayama* is to make ones respiration rhythmic and progressively slower, this is said to allow the practitioner to penetrate other states of consciousness through the harmonization with one's life force (*prana*). Controlling the *pranayama* is done through the suspension of inhalation (*puraka*), retention (*kumbhaka*) and exhalation (*recaka*) and slowing of the overall breathing rhythm. Some yogis with practice can stop breathing for over five minutes (Jones 9895).

Hatha-yoga is the “physical yoga which teaches the aspirant how to control his body (Fuller 51),” It means the union (yoga) between sun and moon or the two different elements of the body-mind union (Feuerstein 38), and is the type of yoga most commonly known in the west. Although yoga is thought to have existed before Patanjali, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* form the foundation of yoga, along with the *Hatha-Yoga Pradipika*. According to scriptures there were believed to be originally 8,400,000 *asanas*, each representing an incarnation needed to be lived before liberation could be achieved; however, only around a few hundred are known today. In the *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha* one of the most popular current yoga manuals, only 84 *asanas* are discussed (Saraswati 9). Animal *asanas* came about through the risis observation of animals; they saw how the animals lived and created these *asanas* based on their movements. They then discovered how a particular posture can affect certain hormonal secretions of the body which can therefore improve one's health. For example, *sharshankasana* the hare pose may influence the flow of adrenaline such as in the “fight or flight” response, as seen in hares who are

easily startled (Saraswati 10). The animal poses are believed to have been created to remind the practitioner that life is sacred and the world is full of living creatures (Radha 6).

Mastering any *asana* is the first stage in yoga. Poses aimed to increase strength and health can be done in many different ways based on the skill level of the practitioner. *Asanas* are divided into different categories depending on the text; Swami Sivananada Radha's book: *Hatha Yoga: The Hidden Language* divides them into categories of structures, tools, plants, fish, reptiles, insects, birds, animals, and finally *shavasana*, and the text by Swami Satyananda Saraswati: *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha* divides poses into beginner, intermediate and advanced. Various poses overlap and many are included in both texts, different yoga sources however usually have different tips and information about particular *asanas* so many practitioners study a variety of yoga texts.

The Beginner Group according to Saraswati's text consists of the *pawanmuktasana* series, exercises for the eyes, relaxation *asanas*, meditation *asanas*, *varjrasana* group of *asanas*, standing *asanas*, *surta namaskara*, and *chandra namaskarais*. The intermediate group consists of the *padmasana* group of *asanas*, backward bending *asanas*, forward bending *asanas*, spinal twisting *asanas* and balancing *asanas*. The advanced group does not have any subcategories and should be attempted only when the beginner and intermediate poses have been mastered (Saraswati 9-360).

Beginner's yoga is done for a variety of purposes, whether the practitioner is just starting their journey through yoga, or due to illness or bodily constraints is unable to do more advanced poses. Although the beginner *asanas* may be simple, the health benefits are alleged to be numerous and should not be underestimated. The *pawanmuktasana* series is believed to be very

useful for the management of various disorders and maintaining health by developing awareness of the body (Saraswati 21). It is further separated into three groups of *asanas*: the anti-rheumatic group, the digestive/abdominal group and *shakti bandha* or energy blocking group (Saraswati 22).

The anti-rheumatic group of postures is aimed at a low level of physical exertion to loosen the joints and to help with ailments such as arthritis, high blood pressure and heart problems. A few examples are: *janu chakra* (knee crank) aimed at loosening the knee joints and *poorna titali* (full butterfly) which can alleviate tiredness from long hours of standing or walking (Saraswati 23-44).

The digestive/abdominal group is said to be helpful for people with ailments such as indigestion, reproductive disorders, diabetes, excess gas, constipation, acidity, and lack of appetite. By strengthening the digestive system and clearing energy blockages of the abdominal area these ailments can be relieved. A few postures are: *pada sanchalanasana* (cycling) which helps to strengthen the abdominal and lower back muscles while also loosening the knee and hip joints and *jhulana lurhakanasana* (rocking and rolling) which massages the back, buttocks and hips (Saraswati 44-59).

The energy blocking postures are aimed mostly at improving energy flow. It is also thought to be useful for menstrual problems, a stiff back, toning pelvic organs and muscles, and to improve overall endocrine function. This series is also commonly done prenatally and after birth, as it tones the reproductive muscles and aids in child birth. A few common positions are; *rajju karshanasana* (pulling the rope), which loosens the shoulder joints and stretches the muscles of the upper back, the *chakki chalanasana* (churning the mill), which is believed to help

regulate the menstrual cycle as it improves the function of the organs and nerves of the pelvis and abdomen. *Chakki calanasana* can be preformed up to the third month of pregnancy (Saraswati 60-73).

Yoga exercises for the eyes are done to improve visual health, and it is believed that through practice and patience one can improve or even reverse eye disorders such as glaucoma, cataracts and trachoma which are due to defective ocular muscles. An example of a yogic eye exercise is palming. This is done by placing warm palms (due to vigorous rubbing) over the eyelids to relax the eye muscles; the warmth of the hands stimulates circulation of the blood and other parts of the eye (Saraswati 74-8).

Asanas done either before or following yoga practice are typically referred to as relaxation *asanas*. One example is the *shavasana* (corpse pose) or death pose which would done by simply lying on your back with the palms facing upward. It is believed that it is useful in developing whole body awareness (Saraswati 85-7) and “the best sign of a good *savasana* is a feeling of deep peace and pure bliss. Radha the author of *Hatha-Yoga: The Hidden Language* explains *savasana* as a watchful surrendering of the ego. Forgetting oneself, one discovers oneself (Radha 254).”

Meditation *asanas* are done to allow the practitioner to sit still for extended lengths of time. The most popular example is the *pasmasana* (lotus pose). It is referred to as the “royal posture” as it is both glamorous and graceful. The Lotus symbolizes birth and death, the interaction of the created forces. To the Chinese it represents the past, present and future as the plant bears fruit, flowers and buds simultaneously (Radha 121). This *asana* creates a firm

foundation to begin meditation as it allows the body to be motionless in a steady position. It also is said to relax the nervous system by putting a slight pressure on the spine (Saraswati 93-9).

The *vajrasana* group of *asanas* are easy to perform and are beneficial for many aspects of the body and spirit. They are believed regulate the sexual energy as well as reproductive and digestive organs (Saraswati 108-134). In India the *simhasana* (loin pose) is seen as the absolute representation of royal strength and majesty, it is believed to help one to discover the power masked within oneself and the danger it is to keep subdued pretending to be a mere lamb. *Simhasana* pose is explained by placing the right foot under the left buttock, and the left under the right. Bring the weight forward on the knees with the arms straight and the palms of the hands placed on the knees. Stretch the jaw wide open, and stretch the tongue out toward the chin. Forcefully exhale air out the mouth with the throat open (Radha 239-41).

Standing *asanas* are claimed to be very beneficial to those who have back pain or spend a lot of time sitting as they stretch and strengthen the back. The *tadasana* (palm tree pose) is believed to be especially helpful for stretching the back and loosening the spine; as it is done by reaching to the sky with both arms and raising the heels off the ground. It is said to increase balance both physically and mentally and can be useful during the first six months of pregnancy to keep the abdominal muscles strong (Saraswati 135-140).

Surya namaskara (salutations to the sun) is a group of *asanas* that were not originally in the yoga scriptures, but were later added on. *Surya namaskara* is thought to be one of the most useful groups of postures to aid in health yet at the same time is helpful in “preparing for spiritual awakening and the resulting expansion of awareness (Saraswati 159).” It incorporates *pranayama*, *mantra* and meditation and is said to be most beneficial if done in the morning.

There are twelve *asanas* which represent the twenty-four hours of the day, the twelve zodiac phases of the year and the biorhythms of the body. The *asanas* in sequence are: 1. *pranamasana* (prayer pose), 2. *hasta utthanasana* (raised arms pose), 3. *padahatasana* (hand to foot pose), 4. *ashwa sanchalanasana* (equestrian pose), 5. *parvatasana* (mountain pose), 6. *ashtanga namaskara* (salute with eight parts or points), 7. *bhujangasana* (cobra pose), 8. *parvatasana* (mountain pose), 9. *ashwa sanchalanasana* (equestrian pose), 10. *padhatasana* (hand to foot pose), 11. *hasta utthanasana* (raised arm pose) and 12. *pranamasana* (prayer pose). *Asanas* 13-24 are a repeating of *asanas* 1-12 (Saraswati 160-172).

Chandra namaskara (salutation to the moon) are similar to the *surya namaskara* as they reflect the 14 lunar phases of the moon. Each *asanas* name represents a day of the lunar cycle and should be practiced at night when the moon is visible, or at dawn during a full moon. The sequence of poses for *chandra namaskara* are the same sequence as the *surya namaskara* however, the pose *ardha chandrasana* is added at position 5 and 11 in the first round, and in positions 19 and 25 in the second round (Saraswati 173).

The intermediate group of *asanas* consist of the *padmasana* group, backward bending *asanas*, forward bending *asanas*, inverted *asanas* and balancing *asanas*. According to Saraswati, the *padmasana* group is believed to help “clear physical, emotion and mental blocks, help awaken the energy centres of the body and induce tranquility (Saraswati 181).” However, they should only be attempted if the *padmasana* (lotus pose) can be done for extended periods of time with comfort and zero muscle strain. (Saraswati 181-7).

Backward bending *asanas* are claimed to have a variety of benefits for the torso, particularly the abdomen and back. They are associated with people who “bend over backwards”

for others, so it is believed that people who have an apprehension of these *asanas* may have a fear of facing life or love (Saraswati 194-5). One well known *asana* is *bhujangasana* (cobra pose); *buhjanga* meaning serpent and, “like a snake [while performing the pose the] spine should be moved from end to end, when the head moves the movement is transmitted to the tail (Radha 146-8).” Many yogis believe to cobra pose to be helpful in relocating slipped disks, improving circulation in the back, and alleviating female reproductive disorders (Saraswati 198).

Forward bending *asanas* are similar to the backward bending in their difficulty, and such positions are claimed to give an insight into the individual psyche. Some believe “An inability to bend forward may indicate a stiff, proud or stubborn personality (Saraswati 227),” and those that can are associated with; bowing and humility. Forward bending loosens up the back by utilizing gravity to stretch the muscles; it is typically done by bending from the hips and not the waist, which creates greater flexibility in the poses. The *utthita janu sirshasana* (standing head between knees pose) is pretty self explanatory, and is believed to help stimulate the pancreas and relax the hip joints and hamstring muscles. Like any inverted pose it is thought to supply the brain with rich blood, revitalizing the mind (Saraswati 227-247).

Inverted *asanas*, similar to *utthita janu sirshasana* mentioned above, are believed to cause rich blood to flow to the brain which may therefore cause a change in thinking. They are thought to improve health and reduce anxiety by slowing the breath and creating a better exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide (Saraswati 258) helping bringing clarity of mind in emotions and in language. These *asanas* should be done with caution and not preformed around furniture; after vigorous exercise, and should not be attempted by people with high blood pressure or back conditions (Saraswati 259). One of the more difficult inverted *asanas* is the *sirshasana* (headstand pose). It is done in six stages working up to the final position with the

forearms on each side of the head, interlocking fingers at the back and the rest of the body straight upwards towards the sky. *Sirshasana* is considered to be the greatest of all *asanas* (Saraswati 279-283) as it represents: struggle, rebellion, awareness and learning (Radha 44).

The last group of intermediate *asanas* is the balancing *asanas*. These poses can be difficult for many if they have not previously developed a good sense of balance. However, with practice they are said to develop the cerebellum; the part of the brain that controls the motion of the body. It can also be helpful when practicing these to find a spot on the wall to focus on to help with balance (Saraswati 290). One example of a balancing *asana* is the *vrikshasana* (tree pose) which is done by placing one foot against the opposite leg's inner thigh, with the knee facing outwards, and the arms stretched over the head (Radha 102). It is believed that “trees, like people have their destiny, and much of the survival of the tree depends on the sturdiness of the trunk and the branches, sturdiness that must be balanced with flexibility (Radha 109).”

Vrikshasana is thought to represent: destiny, firm attachment, seasons of human life, beauty in death and the tree is the symbol of man and the cycle of life (Radha 110).

Advanced *asanas* are reserved for serious practitioners who have mastered the beginner and intermediate *asanas*, and should only be attempted when the body is flexible enough and one's concentration is strong. Any strain in these postures can result in injury (Saraswati 325). *Vrishchikasana* (scorpion pose) is believed to represent danger, pain, balance, strength, reward, compassion, sexual activity and it is alleged to entice the practitioner with a taste of the nectar of consciousness making them long for more. The scorpion pose is accomplished by resting the forearms on the floor and raising the legs up while the head and chest are lifted, bending the legs at the knees so that the feet slowly lower until they rest on the top of the head (Radha 174-8).

[See Saraswati and Radha for an extensive list of yoga *asanas* with techniques, legends and benefits].

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Article written by: Jillian King (April 2010) who is solely responsible for its content.

