

## Concept of Asana

The concept of asanas has changed much over time, but its purpose holds common ideas and themes. As many spiritual or philosophical concepts, populations change the meanings or usage these concepts to fit modern habits and needs. In the following paper I will discuss the definition of asana, as seen in different sacred texts, the evolution of asana in yoga, the purpose of asana, how the western world has interpreted asana differently than its true origin, my personal experience in relation to these arguments and in conclusion my future hopes for yoga in respect to asanas.

The term “asana” can be found in many different texts. In the Hatha Yoga Pradipika it is translated as “the art of sitting still.” In the Patanjali Yoga Sutras it refers to both the place in which the yogin is seated and the position in which they are seated. Patanjali defines asana as “to be seated in a position that is firm, but relaxed.” The literal translation of the Sanskrit word means “to be seated” or “to sit and be”. In later texts it can be found to refer to static physical positions, not only seated postures. However there is a common thread among all these Sanskrit texts, the position is to be “steady and comfortable”, as stated by Patanjali in sutra 2 verse 46 of the Yoga Sutras.

In early sacred Sanskrit texts, asana is used to refer to the platform used to sit on during meditation. This definition changed, perhaps due to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, where he uses the word asana to mean posture, physical position or yoga posture. In particular Patanjali was referring to seated postures. In chapter 1 verse 17 of the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, asana is first mentioned stating, “Being the first accessory of Hatha Yoga, asana is described first. It should be practiced for gaining steady posture, health and lightness of body.” The Thejobindu Upanisad, which in chapter 1.23 states, “an asana is that which allows long and comfortable contemplation of Brahman.” The Bhagavadgita states in verse VI.12, “seating on the mat, yoga is practiced for the purification of the atman.” In medieval times we can find the first texts from hatha yoga the introduction of other postures aiming to remove physical defects which impair the yogi from assuming the position of meditation or from holding this position effortlessly for an extended period of time. Following this transition of the concept of asana, gradually “corrective” asanas were introduced to yoga in order to weaken illnesses in the body. In more recent text we can find not only these postures, but also what they are good for healing.

If we move to more recent texts, we can find an increasing number of postures. Originally in the Yoga Sutra by Patanjali, written between 4-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, we find 84 postures. In the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, 15 century AD, of these 84, the first four are important (siddhasana, padmasana, bhadrasana and simhasana). In the Hatha Ratnavali, 17<sup>th</sup> century AD, we find full descriptions of 52 of these 84 postures. Swami Vishnu-devananda published in 1959 a compilation of 66 basic postures, with 136 variations of these postures. Sri Dharma Mittra wrote in 1975 in the Master Yoga Chart of 908 Postures, that there are an infinite number of asanas, and eventually he compiled a list of 1300 postures and variations. From the original Sanskrit texts many different schools of yoga have been born. Each of these schools follows a different aspect of the original teachings and over time modifies it to fit modern demands and way of life. There is also a common idea that there are fixed postures, however each student must fine-tune the asana to their body and needs. In 2007 a team of yoga gurus, government officials and 200 scientists from CSIR created a database of all known postures from 35 ancient texts. They identified 900 asanas in this database, known as Traditional Knowledge Digital Library.

It is not important the number of asanas or the difficulty of the posture, what is important is the purpose of the practicing asana. From my research I have found 4 main purposes for practicing asanas; to

rebalance the yogin, to quiet the mind, to bring attention to the present moment and to prepare the yogin for meditation. I also noted two concepts that run throughout the Sanskrit texts; the asana should be steady and comfortable, and that in the details lays awareness. These concepts of asana bring a deeper meaning to the positions practiced in yoga and are what separate yoga from stretching or contortionism. Once these concepts are embraced the practice of yoga and asana can bring profound change to the yogin's life deepening their inner peace and stillness, while preparing them for other limbs of yoga.

The first purpose of practicing the asanas I will discuss is the rebalancing of the yogin. This is both physically and emotionally. Through control of the body in the asanas the yogin is able to free themselves from the duality of heat/cold, hunger/satiety, and joy/grief, which is the first step to unattachment and relieving suffering. Patanjali wrote about the balance of all in asana, the effort and yet the effortlessness, the doing and yet the sense of undoing, the softness and yet also the strength. Swami Satyananda Saraswati wrote, "Thereby the pairs of opposites cease to have any impact." This principle of rebalancing can be seen in the sequences of asanas practiced during a yoga session. They should always be balanced, repeating to the left what is done on the right and countering each asana with an asana that utilizes the opposing muscles. By realigning the body the yogin also steadies the mind and brings the emotions to a neutral state. Alan Finger wrote in Chakra Yoga, "this balancing brings a feeling of lightness, space, and union of opposites: yoga!"

The second purpose of the asanas is to quiet the mind. Our minds run nonstop all day and even during the night in our dreams. We can get lost in all the thoughts that spring into our mind. Often when a person tries meditation for the first times it is very difficult to stop this mind-chatter. I once was told in meditation, to note every thought that comes into my mind and let it go, and that after a while of being conscious of my thoughts they would cease to come and my mind would be quiet. For me this didn't happen. I continually planned the next activities I had coming, thought about different ways to do current projects, or other random things. The asanas bring the yogin's attention to the body and quiet the mind. When complete attention is given to the asana, to the sensation of the muscles, to the rhythm of the breath and to the changes that are made in the alignment of the body, the mind softly quiets. This creates a great awareness in the yogin of what is mind, what is body and can shed light as to what makes up the self, the essence of the person.

The third purpose of the asanas is to bring our attention to the present moment. Our minds are continually replaying events that happened in the past and making predictions of what is to come in our future. This process causes much regret over unchangeable actions, worries about hypothetical events that have not yet occurred and suffering for the both. While practicing asanas, the mind is brought to the present moment, to the sensations of the body, the breath, and the soul. For me, acknowledging the present moment gives me a sense of peace and calm. I realize that in this moment I am well; I am healthy, cared for, strong, safe and serene. Bring our concentration on the present moment quiets the mind and prepares us for meditation. The sensations of the present moment consume our attention and we are no longer bound to the past and future.

The final purpose of the asanas is to prepare the yogin for meditation. By rebalancing the body, quieting the mind and bringing the attention to the present, a yogin can begin to explore the realm of meditation. It is difficult to stay in a seated position for long periods of time without having discomfort or muscle spasms because in modern times we are not accustomed to sitting in a meditative posture. The asanas help to relieve tension in the muscles and prepare them to be still for extended periods of time.

Without physical discomfort the yogin is able to immerse themselves in raja yoga without constantly being distracted by the body.

In the different yogic texts a common idea of 'steady and comfortable' can be found repetitively. The asanas, as written in the Patanjali, should be stable and comfortable (sthira-sukham-asanam). The positions should be held for extended periods of time, ideally three minutes each, in order to allow the body and mind to become comfortable in the position, relaxing the muscles. It is believed that Patanjali was referring to the body's stability and the mind's comfort, however also the body should not be in discomfort to practice an asana. The comfort of the mind means that we are in the present moment without attachment to past or future events, we are focused on the self and the present moment. Thus progress in the yoga or in asanas is not through how challenging or complicated we can make postures, but rather in the deepening of awareness that we are more than just a physical body.

Another concept found commonly in yogic texts is the idea that fine-tuning of asanas helps the yogin to deepen their awareness and insight. By noting the position of the arm, the sensations of the arm, and the movement of the arm the yogin can gain a deeper awareness of the natural tendencies of the body and how small changes can greatly impact the asana physically and also mentally. Bringing our attention to the small details of an asana also focus the mind more on the present and prevent drifting thoughts from distracting the yogin. It also brings us in touch with our energy. The asanas teach us to remain steady throughout the shifts and challenges of life. Tuning into the asanas small details is a way for us to become more sensitive to our energy and helps us see that the physical body is only a small part of who we really are.

With this said, it is important to note that there are also many physical benefits for practicing the asanas. Some of these benefits found by Dr. Thomas Ross and Dr. Chase Hayes include:

- Improving flexibility
- Improving strength
- Improving balance
- Reducing stress and anxiety
- Reducing symptoms of lower back pain
- Being beneficial for asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Increasing energy and decreasing fatigue
- Shortening labor and improving birth outcomes
- Improving physical health and quality of life measures in the elderly
- Improving diabetes management
- Reducing sleep disturbances
- Reducing hypertension
- Improving blood circulation

These quantitative measures of physical changes may seem to stray from the spiritual and meditative concept of the asanas set forth in ancient Sanskrit text, but I think they are proof of the idea that the asanas fight disease and illness. The focus of the physical concept of asana has overtaken the mental and spiritual awareness of asana in the Western world, but perhaps this can be a gateway for these second two concepts to take root in the western approach to asana.

I would now like to take a look at the way the Western world has interpreted yoga and the asanas. We can find many different types of yoga in the west, from sauna yoga to water yoga, yoga on a paddle

board to yoga/pilates mix in gyms with upbeat music and teachers pumping us their students. The focus of yoga in western society seems to be more on the difficulty of the posture one is able to hold, the muscle tone they are able to acquire or the improved performance they achieve in another sport. The concepts of quieting the mind, rebalancing one's being, bringing attention to the present and preparing oneself for meditation, have all been lost. In fact, yoga and meditation are divided into different classes and often are not even offered in the same structures. I was happy to see classes of Yin Yoga being offered on my last trip to the USA, where postures are held for longer periods of time and attention is brought to the breath and quieting the mind. In any other yoga class I have taken the idea of holding postures 3 minutes was unheard of. The focus was on how many postures could be fit in to an hour class and how difficult the variations could be made.

This is not to criticize yoga classes in the west. I think that without these classes in gyms and even in schools there would not be the widespread interest in yoga that we see today. These "stretching classes" as I would refer to them, serve as a gateway for the general population to be introduced to yoga. Many people who begin these classes choose to deepen their understanding of the asanas and their original purpose. Yoga is now a very accepted practice in the west, and even for western men. In America 10 to 15 years ago yoga was seen as something for women or for sensitive men, most of whom were vegan and lead a naturalist lifestyle. It was not masculine, which is odd because it was started by men and to this day mostly taught by men, and it was seen as alternative. These stretching classes advertised as yoga with a heavy emphasis on the body, muscles and endurance have made yoga an acceptable and even praised activity. Doctors now regularly recommend it, injured athletes practice it and even my dad now has become a yogi and talks about it with his friends. This is a positive step for yoga if there is awareness as to what the purpose of the asanas and yoga is, and how this differs from what we call yoga in the west. In "Yoga Unveiled" Krishnamacharya, the founder of vinyasa style of asana said that he had a vision that in order to save humanity he had to take vinyasa to the west, that this was the only way the people of the west would listen.

In my personal experience, this introduction to the asanas as a stretching class before dance lessons in university opened up a world to me over time as I was lead to deepen my understanding of yoga and better comprehend my experience of the asanas. The concepts I discussed above in this paper came naturally to me over time as I practiced on my own, creating a sequence of asanas that my body needed that particular day. The asanas themselves led me to understand their purpose, rebalancing my mind, body and soul. Ultimately it is through this process of certification to teach yoga that I fully grasp the concept of "steady, comfortable, asana."

I hope that this awareness I was fortunate to have in relation to the concept of asana is more and more common among people attending yoga classes in the west. I agree with Krishnamacharya's vision and that a more physical practice was first needed in order for humanity to begin to look inward to a more stable and grounded place of stillness. I hope that this happens, that yoga classes in the west become about the inward journey and the asanas become a means toward meditation and balance, rather than the end physical result. I would like to see meditation becoming a part of yoga and offered following the practice of the asanas. In this way the true benefits of asana could be reaped.

#### Resorces

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