

Yoga Asana

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The Sanskrit word “asana” is derived from the root word meaning to be present, to sit quietly, to inhabit. Asana literally translates as “seat” or “sit in a particular position”. Asana is one of the eight limbs of classical yoga. In *The Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali defines the essential meaning of asana is two words: sthira and sukham. Sthira means steadiness, stability and firmness and is derived from the root word “stha”, which means “to stand”. Sukham means ease, comfort and happiness.

The pace of modern living, with its ego-driven consumerism and the drive to succeed, can come at great cost to our physical, emotional and spiritual health. These days, many people spend their time racing through life “putting out fires”. “If only I had more time or more money or if I lived out of the city” is a modern-day cry that is often heard. We spend our time fighting our own reality, denying our feelings and trying to spend as little time as possible within our internal worlds.

Asana practice offers you that space and creates the opportunity for you to come home to your self. It returns you to a space of connection and oneness with your self and the world around you. You learn to “sit” with your self. You create the space to slow down, reflect and be able to be comfortable in your own body and spirit.

Yoga asanas might only be one part of an eight-limbed system of yoga, yet asana practice is a very practical tool to bring you back to your heart, to the moment and to your authentic self. For many people, the physical practice is the first step on the path of yoga. It may not traditionally be the first limb of yoga but it appears to be the most appropriate place to start.

As many of us are too busy even to breathe fully or to acknowledge a feeling, when you first start your asana practice you may be confronted with the feelings of disease. After many years of avoiding the body, many newcomers to yoga are often overwhelmed and confronted by such revelations of what is going on inside them. Through steady and consistent practice of yoga, maintaining your focus and using the breath, you are able to stay present, one breath at a time. Slowly, you will no longer want to run from your self.

Finding Balance

For a complete holistic yoga practice, you need to address not only the emotional practice but also the balance between the emotional and the physical. In B.K.S. Iyengar’s *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, he writes: “Asana... offers a controlled battle ground for the process of conflict and creation. The aim is to recreate the process of human evolution in our own internal environment. We thereby have the opportunity to observe and comprehend our own evolution, to the point where conflict is resolved and there is only oneness, as when the river meets the sea. This creative struggle is experienced in the headstand: as we challenge ourselves to improve the position, fear of falling acts to inhibit us. If we are rash we fall, if timorous we make no progress. But if the interplay of the two forces is observed, analysed and controlled we can achieve perfection.”

The mind is harnessed by the body as it concentrates on articulating certain movements to achieve a posture. Through the execution of physical precision and mental detachment you are able to connect to your body, allowing yourself to move from the mind to the muscles. The asanas provide a structure or framework to enable

the mind to have a focal point. When you are executing an asana such as *trikonasana* (triangle pose), the awareness is in the foundations; that is, the building, maintaining and sustaining of the asana. If a practice becomes too easy, the mind is not engaged and it wanders. If the mind wanders away from the asana, it attaches itself to something else (for example, whether you left the cat out in the morning or forgot to ring your friend).

It is at this stage that you have stopped practising yoga and started a purely callisthenic workout. Alternatively, if you let the mind dictate the practice, you can push yourself too far past your natural boundaries in order to achieve what you perceive the posture should look like rather than what you are able to do in the moment. This may lead to injury or mental hardness.

Bringing Asanas To Life

A baby's first breath signifies life. In yoga, the breath brings life to a posture. The breath or *prana*, is the life force. It is the very essence of your being, your vitality. The majority of us breathe unconsciously; it is something that just happens as an automatic response. This can serve us some of the time, such as when we are sleeping, however, if we unlock the full abilities of the breath, we find that its healing qualities are bountiful. The breath moves us. It subtly moves the body as the rib cage expands but it can also move a posture to a deeper level. It can also move a hardened mind. During periods of stress, tension or anxiety, we try to control the mind by holding the breath, thereby restricting the flow of life force. The breath is the link. It is the healing power that you connect with during your practice. When you become conscious of the breath, you become aware, in turn, of your patterns of restricting, holding on or not surrendering to the moment.

Inversions

Inversions basically involve turning the body upside down. Regardless of the style or level of yoga you practise, inversions can revitalise your whole body. Turning your body upside down reverses the effects of gravity and floods the organs with nourishing blood. For the more experienced yoga student, *shirshasana* (headstand) is said to be the "king" of yoga poses and *sarvangasana* (shoulder stand) the "queen". According to Erich Schiffmann, author of *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving Into Stillness*, "Time spent upside down every day is one of the best things you could possibly do for yourself."

Chief benefits

- The glands and organs are given a fresh supply of arterial (oxygenated) blood.
- Gravity draws blood back to the heart so that the heart may rest.
- Circulation is enhanced, thus increasing the assimilation of nutrients into the bloodstream and ensuring the distribution of these nutrients to vital organs.
- Relieves the early stages of varicose veins and stops their return by preventing blood from stagnating in the legs.
- Increases memory, concentration and intellectual capacity. Relieves mental sluggishness, insomnia, depression and fatigue.
- Encourages deep abdominal breathing, massaging the heart and lung region.
- Massages the internal organs and prevents prolapse of the abdominal organs. Indigestion and constipation are relieved or eliminated.
- Many complications of the womb or ovaries disappear with regular practice of inversions.

Contraindications

It is recommended that women avoid inversions when they are menstruating. These postures should also be avoided if you suffer from high blood pressure, disorders of the eyes or reflux. If you experience pressure behind the eyes, ringing in the ears or shortness of breath in these poses, come down from the pose and alert your yoga teacher. It is recommended that these postures be attempted for the first time under the supervision of a certified teacher.

Forward Bends

Forward bends are postures of surrender and acceptance. They calm the nervous system, quiet the mind and naturally turn the attention inward. Examples of forward bends include janu sirsasana (head-to-knee pose) and garbhasana (child pose).

Chief benefits

- By folding forwards, distractions are cut down and the mind may begin to settle. Forward bends can give wonderful relief to those experiencing nervousness or anxiety.
- Stimulates, tones and massages the digestive organs, aiding or increasing the elimination of toxins and the assimilation of nutrients.
- Can slow the enlargement of the liver or spleen.
- As forward bends work on balancing the pancreas, they are highly recommended for those suffering diabetes.
- Strengthens and stretches the muscles of the hips and pelvis and gives a direct stretch to the hamstrings.
- Gives the spine an all-over stretch and relieves lumbar and sciatic pain.

Contraindications

Because of the reflective nature of the postures, they are not recommended for those suffering from acute depression (there is too much opportunity to “think”). A more active practice is beneficial as it keeps the mind more actively focused. Care must also be taken by those with disc problems.

Hints and tips

Stand with your feet hip-width apart and your hands on your hips. Hanging from your hips, bend forwards until your chest and belly make contact with your thighs and hold your tail bone up high. Keep the weight even between the front, back, inside and outside of your feet, then slowly begin to straighten your legs, keeping the pressure of your chest on your thighs constant. Release your hands towards the floor, then bend your arms, holding onto each elbow. Think about extending your elbows forwards (away from the shins) and down. The main emphasis is on keeping your spine straight when bending forwards.

Backbends, Or Heart Openers

Backbends are one of the most challenging asana groups. They require the spine to be in a position that would rarely occur in daily life. The most common backward bends are the cobra, locust, bow and camel. Each involves arching the back but in different ways.

Chief benefits

- Opens the heart.
- Invigorates the digestive system
- Strengthens the muscles of the back and gives the spine a sensation of elasticity.
- The chest expands, which is of great benefit to those suffering from asthma or chest infections.
- Gives the kidneys an extra squeeze.

- Gives you the feeling of internal youth, increased energy and happiness!

Contraindications

Those with disc problems should be cautious, as should those who experience nervous anxiety. Those with kidney disease, spondylolisthesis or spondylolysis should seek the advice of a doctor before practising these poses.

Standing Poses

Standing postures require both strength and flexibility. They are the foundation postures. It is in these poses that you learn to ground yourself physically and mentally. Considered to be the first step in many forms of yoga, these poses teach you alignment that can follow through to many other asanas.

Chief benefits

- Invigorates, strengthens and warms up the entire body.
- Brings strength to the legs and pelvis.
- Opens up the hips and pelvis and works directly on lengthening the muscles and tendons of the legs.
- Stimulates digestion.
- Improves circulation.
- Builds emotional strength and courage.

Contraindications

Do not practice if suffering from high blood pressure or heart problems.

Hints and Tips

Try these poses with the heels, buttocks and shoulders square to the wall. You will also benefit if you have a partner to check your alignment to the wall.

Twists

Twisting postures help realign and lengthen the spinal column as well as stretch and open the muscles of the back. Examples include namaskar parsvakonasana (prayer twist), matsyendrasana (seated twist) and parivrtta ardha chandrasana (half moon twist).

Chief benefits

- Relieves backache and stiffness in the neck and shoulders.
- AS the twists work to lengthen the muscles between the rib cage, respiration is increased. Those with asthma can experience great relief.
- The kidneys, liver and abdominal organs all get a squeeze. This is a little like squeezing out a sponge and aids both the elimination of toxins and the assimilation of nutrients.
- Mobility is increased in the hips and pelvis and the spine becomes more flexible.

Contraindications

Do not practise if suffering from a hernia or stomach problem or if recently recovering from surgery. Only the upper spinal twists should be performed during pregnancy.

Other Asanas

Other groups of asanas include:

- Supine postures, which are done on your back and are a great way to end your yoga practice, release stress and promote flexibility.

- Prone postures, or belly-down postures, which build core body strength in the lower back and abdomen.
- Balancing postures, which improve memory and concentration by engaging your whole mind and body.

Keeping your eyes focused on a single point is the key to all of these postures.

Yoga is both art and science. Art without heart or intention is empty and leave us feeling unsatisfied. Similarly, the asanas, if practised without passion and commitment, are empty and incomplete. Yoga as a science is the unemotional investigation of the body and its various functions. This should occur without judgement as simply the act of gathering information about the body you inhabit. These two elements (art and science) are the difference between acrobatics and yoga. Acrobatics and yoga will give you similar physical benefits (although if the breath is not focused, even this may not be true) but only a practice done with sincerity and love will bring you the mental and emotional benefits. Be clear of your intention before embarking on a yoga practice and open the door to another world.