

Yogasanas: The search of the infinite in the finite body

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Our system of philosophy is known as darshanas (mirrors or direct spiritual perceptions of the Ultimate, the Real). These perceptions were based on the firm foundation of experience. Unfortunately this great and glorious tradition of experiential moorings has been forgotten. Hair-splitting textual scholarship and logical skills of intellectual endeavor is taking place. Even yoga, which is a practical discipline par excellence has become an armchair philosophy.

Denigration of yogasanas as physical which is of no use for those seeking the Supreme has created doubts in many practitioners though Patanjali accords an important place for yogasanas in his treatise. According to Patanjali, mastery of asanas is a precondition for pranayama. In the Sadhana Pada, three sutras are devoted to asanas but in the Vibhuti pada, references to the wealth of the body (kaya sampat) and physical attainments (siddhi) are replete.

Many yogic texts emphasize dhyana asanas (meditative postures). It is also equally true that a yogic text like Shiva Samhita speaks of 84 lakh (100,000) asanas revealing that there are as many asanas as species on this planet.

It is hard to describe asanas at one stretch as each asana has many subtle and fine adjustments, not only in the limbs of the body but on the very fabric of the intelligence and consciousness. One has to train and tone the body to have strength, flexibility, endurance, poise and integration to do it comfortably and correctly for a considerable length of time even in a meditative posture.

Perfect dhyana asana or meditative posture is an impossibility without perfecting many other asanas and toning the body. The value of asanas is explained as tapas by Patanjali in Yoga Sutra II.43 wherein he says that one has to burn out the impurities of the body, senses and mind for the soul to rekindle the spark of divinity which is hidden within. Hence, I feel that the asanas are a form of tapas demanding rigorous discipline.

Today, this rigorous discipline has been transformed into soft instant yoga. This soft casual practice has lost the critical, scientific, experimental exposition of asanas but abundant stereotyped facile writings on the subject are available.

Though asanas have been accepted as an alternative method of medicine due to health consciousness in people, let us not forget the holistic nature of the body as each asana is filled with profound scientific know-how of the body and mind, art and philosophy, starting from the gross body and then piercing the various inner layers (sheaths) of the body to reach the inner ruler - atman.

Asanas, as a science, deal with health and perfection of the body and help to uncover the differences between the body and the mind to keep the self in a crystal pure state. Healthy plants and trees alone yield good flowers and fruits and horticulture was developed so as to grow healthy plants and trees. Similarly, asanas sublimate the senses of perception and organs of action, develop harmony in the functioning of the body and keep the entire nervous system free from blockages. We cannot forget that the body is the only instrument to be used for worldly as well as spiritual pursuits.

Let us start to learn from the known, the visible object like the body before exploring the unknown in order to move towards the subtlest of the subtle, the Self.

Asanas play a major role in correcting the defects of matter (body) and energy (prana) so that they are educated to move towards the refinement of intelligence and consciousness. The structure of the asana cannot change as each asana is an art in itself. But when the sadhaka performs, he does it as if it is his best. One has to study the structure of each asana, arithmetically and geometrically measuring the dimensions and analyzing the forms, so that the real shape and form of each asana is expressed in the presentation.

Asanas may be in the shape of angles or triangles, straight or oblique, circles or arcs, round or oval shaped. One has to note all these points in each asana by observation and study and then act in the field the body - to perform in its pristine glory. It means total involvement of the whole body with senses, mind, intelligence consciousness and self. One has to be careful not to create room for emptiness and forgetfulness in the known and the unknown body of a practitioner.

It is not right to perform asanas according to one's pliability and mobility. One has to mould the body to the asana and not a asana to fit into the body. It is at the same time not ethical to do the pose to one's convenience. Constant study and trial is needed to educate and mould the limbs of the body to fit into the right frame of each asana.

Know the structure, process and functions of an asana and how it interfaces with the body, mind and soul. In each asana one has to feel the flow of intelligence and consciousness from the periphery of the body towards the center - the atman and from the atman towards the periphery. Asana is not a posture wherein one mindlessly and mechanically scrambles in and out of

First, one has to configure the structure of an asana and realize the basic or fundamental points by conatively spacing the structural or anatomical body by adjusting and arranging the limbs for placement in the movements. Then one has to mould the body to fit into the structure of the asana. Resistance and movement should move in concord. Distribution of weight should be even in the muscles, bones, joints, mind and intelligence.

Cut the jewel of the body like a well-cut diamond by creating space in the muscles and skin so that the fine network of the body fits into the asana. This helps the senses of perception to cognize the conative action. This conjunction between organs of action and senses of perception brings reflection in thought and subjective understanding begins to prompt readjustment. Then one begins to act, react, reflect, readjust, correct and perform the best in a conscious way.

One can go further towards subtle actions and feelings for further growth of sensitivity in intelligence and consciousness so that the body with the mind and consciousness come closer to the Self. The life force then moves closer to the skin from the Self and from the Self to the skin, introducing the new light of discrimination for evolution of purusha (atman) and involution of matter (prakriti) to unite. Then harmony and balance, equipoise and sensitivity set in. The doer, the body, and the asana become one - three in one.

From here the sadhaka uses the body as a bow; asanas as arrows to hit the target - the atman. Yoga is practiced in four stages viz., arambhavastha, ghatavastha, parichayavastha, nishpathyavastha.

In the arambhavastha, asanas are done objectively and mechanically. In the ghatavastha one performs with a series of adjustments. Then one tries to acquaint the mind and intelligence with the pose. This is parichayavastha. Then one does a perfect pose with absolute consciousness where the divisions vanish and the asana, the body and the soul are blended together. This is nishpathyavastha.

Performance of asanas can also be studied and understood in terms of pancha bhutas (five elements: earth, water, fire, air and ether) and their counter parts (infra-atomic particles: namely aroma, taste, shape, touch and vibration) to gain rich insights into the structure, process and functions of each asana.

Earth and aroma represent anatomical sheath and physical health, water and taste represent physiological sheath giving organic health. Fire and shape characterize mental health by burning out the toxins and bring coolness and poise in the mind.

Air and touch help the intelligence to discriminate and discern the effect of asana and to diffuse it all over the body, the mind and the self. This contact and touch enlivens, the atma to expand or contract in the ethereal sheath listening to the vibration of the body known as the language of the body.

Each practitioner has to feel these five elements with their dynamic qualities working with unison in each asana or in each flow of energy in pranayama. Then the asana is perfect, comfortable and stable according to Patanjali. Till then it is not a perfect performance of an asana but a process towards it.

The final stage of the performance lies within the smooth release

from the asana by retracing the movements step by step to come back to the starting point. One has to see that no jerks or jolts occur in the body, mind and soul nor the intellectual flame and energy fades or brightens. This is how the asana's performance has to end.

Observe and study the movement of muscles, joints, tissues and cells at the starting point; in the asana, feel the adjustment, reflect and readjust. Similarly, while releasing from the asana, retrace all the points and return to the starting point. This is the right key to be used for mastering an asana.

Conscious and regular practice keeps the cells of the body which have their own intelligence and memory to develop healthily and at the same time makes the gems of the body (hormones) wealthy creating purity in thought to move closer towards the atman.

Thus, practice of asanas with reflective and meditative attention leads the sadhaka to move with the right attitude, right poise and stability bringing about loveliness, liveliness and dynamism. This method of practicing asana carries one from the banks of sorrow towards the banks of emancipation and freedom.

Tvatto dvandvah anabhighatahah - Yoga Sutras II.48 From then on the sadhaka is undisturbed by dualities.

SOURCE: YOGA RAHASYA, VOLUME A, PAGES 84-88]