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Relevance of Asana in the Mechanistic Life of Human

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Abstract:

“Asana” is the Sanskrit word for a physical posture. Expressed in general terms Asana denotes a specific position which can be held in a relaxed and comfortable manner for a long period of time. In the 2nd Century before Christ, Patanjali wrote down the principles of Yoga practice in the “Yoga Sutras” (aphorisms). He named only the meditation posture “Asana” and the physical postures he termed “Yoga Vyayam”. However, in common usage the dynamic Yoga exercises also became known as Asanas.

Many Asanas were derived from the natural movements and positions of animals and carry the names of animals such as “cat”, “deer”, “tiger”, “hare”, etc. These postures make use of examples from nature on how to help oneself. Asanas have a far-reaching effect upon body and mind. The animals instinctively used these movements and positions because of their natural benefits. These effects are attained through the practice of the Asanas. For example: Marjari (The Cat) for stretching the body and the spine, Bhujangasana (The Cobra) for the release of aggression and emotions, and Shashankasana (The Hare) for relaxation. The headstand (Shirshasana) and Lotus (Padmasana), are regarded as the supreme or “royal” Asanas.

Asanas are beneficial for the muscles, joints, cardiovascular system, nervous system and lymphatic system, as well as the mind, psyche and Chakras (energy centres). They are psychosomatic exercises, which strengthen and balance the entire nervous system and harmonise and stabilise the practitioner’s state of mind. The effects of these exercises are a sense of contentment, clarity of mind, relaxation and a feeling of inner freedom and peace.

Key words: Asana, Yoga, Patanjali, Chakra, Yoga Sutras.

The system “Yoga in Daily Life” is designed in such a way that the body is gradually and systematically prepared, leading from simple preparatory exercises towards the more advanced and difficult Asanas. Periods of relaxation are included at the beginning and end of each Yoga class, as well as between the individual exercises. By developing the ability to relax, the feeling for one’s own body is deepened. Physical and mental relaxation are prerequisites for the correct performance of all Yoga exercises and it is only in this way that the effects of the Asanas completely unfold.

The breath plays an important role in the Asanas. With coordination of breath and movement, the Yoga practice becomes harmonious, the breath deepens of its own accord and the body’s circulation and metabolism are stimulated. Use of the breath greatly enhances muscle relaxation by concentrating on tense areas of the body and consciously relaxing those parts with each exhalation.



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As most people are in the habit of breathing quite shallow, inadequately filling the lungs, the Full Yoga Breath is practiced in “Yoga in Daily Life”. Correct breathing is fundamental for the body’s optimum metabolic function. With regular practice, the Full Yoga Breath becomes the habitual and natural way of breathing. Slower and deeper breaths improve circulation, nerve function and one’s whole physical condition. It also develops a calm, clear mind.

Importance of Asanas

Four Asanas are prescribed for the purpose of Japa and meditation. They are Padmasana, Siddhasana, Svastikasana and Sukhasana. You must be able to sit in any one of these four Asanas at a stretch for full three hours without shaking the body. Then only you will get Asana-Jaya, mastery over the Asana. Without securing a steady Asana, you cannot further get on well in meditation. The steadier you are in your Asana, the more you will be able to concentrate and make your mind one-pointed. If you can be steady in the posture even for one hour, you will be able to acquire one-pointed mind and feel thereby infinite peace and Atmic Ananda.

When you sit on the posture, think: “I am as firm as a rock”. Give this suggestion to the mind half a dozen times. Then the Asana will become steady soon. You must become as a living statue when you sit for Dhyana. Then only there will be real steadiness in your Asana. In one year by regular practice you will have success and will be able to sit for three hours at a stretch. Start with half an hour and gradually increase the period.

When you sit in the Asana, keep your head, neck and trunk in one straight line. Stick to one Asana and make it quite steady and perfect by repeated attempts. Never change the Asana. Adhere to one tenaciously. Realise the full benefits of one Asana. Asana gives Dridhata (strength). Mudra gives Sthirata (steadiness). Pratyahara gives Dhairya (boldness). Pranayama gives Laghima (lightness). Dhyana gives Pratyakshatva (perception) of Self and Samadhi gives Kaivalya (isolation) which is verily the freedom or final beatitude.

The postures are as many in number as there are number of species of living creatures in this universe. There are 84 lakhs of Asanas described by Lord Siva. Among them 84 are the best and among these, 32 are very useful. There are some Asanas which can be practised while standing. These are Tadasana, Trikonasana, Garudasana, etc. There are some which can be practised by sitting, such as Paschimottanasana, Padmasana, etc. Some Asanas are done while lying down. These are Uttanapadasana, Pavanamuktasana, etc. Sirshasana, Vrikshasana, etc., are done with head downwards and legs upwards.

In olden days these Asanas were practised in Gurukulas and so the people were strong and healthy and had long lives. In schools and colleges these Asanas should be introduced. Ordinary physical exercises develop the superficial muscles of the body only. One can become a Sandow with a beautiful physique by the physical exercises. But Asanas are intended for physical and spiritual development.

1. Padmasana (Lotus Pose)

Amongst the four poses prescribed for Japa and Dhyana, Padmasana comes foremost. It is the best Asana for contemplation. Rishis like Gheranda, Sandilya, speak very highly of this vital Asana. This is highly agreeable for householders. Even ladies can sit in this Asana. Padmasana is suitable for lean persons and for youths as well.

Sit on the ground by spreading the legs forward. Then place the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh. Place the hands on the knee-joints. You can make a fingerlock and keep the locked hands over the left ankle. This is very convenient for some persons. Or you can



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place the left hand over the left knee and then place the right hand over the right knee with the palm facing upwards and the index finger touching the middle portion of the thumb.

2. Siddhasana (The Perfect Pose)

Next to Padmasana comes Siddhasana in importance. Some eulogise this Asana as even superior to Padmasana for purposes of Dhyana. If you get mastery over this Asana, you will acquire many Siddhis. Further it was being practiced by many Siddhas of yore. Hence the name Siddhasana.

Even fatty persons with big thighs can practise this Asana easily. In fact this is better to some persons than Padmasana. Young Brahmacharins who attempt to get established in celibacy should practise this Asana. This Asana is not suitable for ladies.

Place one heel at anus. Keep the other heel on the root of the generative organ. The feet or legs should be so nicely arranged that the ankle-joints should touch each other. Hands can be placed as in Padmasana.

3. Svastikasana (Prosperous Pose)

Svastikasana is sitting at ease with the body erect. Spread the legs forward. Fold the left leg and place the foot near the right thigh muscles. Similarly bend the right leg and push it in the space between the thigh and calf muscles. Now you will find the two feet between the thighs and calves of the legs. This is a very comfortable Asana. Those who find it difficult to do this, can sit in Samasana.

Place the left heel at the beginning of right thigh and the right heel at the beginning of the left thigh. Sit at ease. Do not bend either on the left or right. This is called ‘Samasana.’

4. Sukhasana

Any easy, comfortable posture for Japa and meditation is Sukhasana, the important point being the head, neck and trunk should be in a line without curve. People who begin Japa and meditation after 30 or 40 years of age generally are not able to sit in Padma, Siddha or Svastikasana for a long time. People sit in any wrong way and they call it ‘Sukhasana’. The trouble is even without their knowledge the backbone forms a curve in a few minutes. Now I will describe to you a nice Sukhasana whereby old persons can sit and meditate for a long time. Young persons should not try this. This is specially designed to suit old people who are unable to sit in Padmasana or Siddhasana in spite of repeated attempts.

5. Sirshasana (Topsy Turvy Pose)

Spread a four-folded blanket. Sit on the two knees. Make a finger-lock by interweaving the fingers. Place it on the ground up to the elbow. Now keep the top of your head on this finger-lock or between the two hands. Slowly raise the legs till they become vertical. Stand for five seconds in the beginning and gradually increase the period by 15 seconds each week to 20 minutes or half an hour. Then very slowly, bring it down. Strong people will be able to keep the Asana for half an hour within 2 or 3 months. Do it slowly. There is no harm. If you have time, do twice daily both morning and evening. Perform this Asana very, very slowly, to avoid jerks. While standing on the head, breathe slowly through the nose and never through the mouth.

6. Sarvangasana (All-Members Pose)

This is a mysterious Asana which gives wonderful benefits. Spread a thick blanket on the floor and practice this Asana on the blanket. Lie on the back quite flat. Slowly raise the legs. Lift the trunk, hips, and legs quite vertically. Support the back with the two hands, one on either side. Rest the elbows on the ground. Press the chin against the chest (Jalandhara Bandha). Allow the back-shoulder portion and neck to touch the ground closely. Do not allow the body to shake



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or move to and fro. Keep the legs straight. When the Asana is over, bring the legs down very, very slowly with elegance and not with any jerks. In this Asana the whole weight of the body is thrown on the shoulders. You really stand on the shoulders with the help and support of the elbows. Concentrate on the Thyroid gland which lies on the front lower part of the neck. Retain the breath as long as you can do with comfort, and slowly exhale through the nose.

7. Matsyasana (Fish Posture)

This Asana will help one to float on water easily with Plavini Pranayama. Therefore it is called fish-pose, Matsyasana. Spread a blanket and sit on Padmasana by keeping the right foot over the left thigh and the left over right thigh. Then lie flat on the back. Hold the head by the two elbows. This is one variety.

Stretch the head back, so that the top of your head rests on the ground firmly on one side and the buttocks only on the other, thus making a bridge or an arch of the trunk. Place the hands on the thighs or catch the toes with the hands. You will have to give a good twisting to the back. This variety is more efficacious than the former one. The benefits that you derive from this variety are a hundred times more than what you get in the previous variety.

8. Paschimottanasana

Sit on the ground and stretch the legs stiff like a stick. Catch the toes with the thumb and index and middle fingers. While catching, you have to bend the trunk forwards. Fatty persons will find it rather difficult to bend. Exhale. Slowly bend without jerks till your forehead touches your knees. You can keep the face even between the knees. When you bend down, draw the belly back. This facilitates the bending forward. Bend slowly by gradual degrees. Take your own time. There is no hurry. When you bend down, bend the head between the hands. Retain it on a level with them. Young persons with elastic spine can touch the knees with the forehead even in their very first attempt. In the case of grown-up persons with rigid spinal column, it will take a fortnight or a month for complete success in the posture. Retain the breath till you take the forehead back, to its original position, till you sit straight again. Then breathe

The Difference between Asanas and Gymnastics:-

In contrast to gymnastic exercises, Asanas are practiced slowly to enable mental focus and a conscious understanding of the movement. The number of exercises practised is not important, but rather the quality of performance. Before, after and between the exercises, a period of conscious physical and mental relaxation should be included.

The objective of the Asanas is not the conversion of bottled-up energy or tension into movement, rather it is to harmonise the body and mind by consciously observing the physical and mental process as each movement or relaxation is practiced. The body does not become tired or exhausted through the Asanas. On the contrary, with energy recharged, one feels rested and refreshed.

Important Principles for Practice of the Asanas

1. Asanas are always performed in coordination with the breath:
 - o Movements that expand the chest and abdominal cavity, are always connected with the inhalation



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- Movements that narrow the chest and abdominal cavity, are always connected with the exhalation
- 2. In the initial stages of practice, the Asanas are performed once or twice without holding, so that the movement of the body and the breath are synchronised. In this way it is clearly established with which movement to inhale or exhale. This type of practice calms the nervous system, stimulates the glands, increases the capacity of the breath and frees one from physical and mental stress. The mind becomes relaxed, calm and clear.
- 3. Only after this preliminary practice should an Asana be held for a longer time, breathing normally. During practice, concentration is directed to the specific part of the body on which the exercise is working. The breath consciousness is also directed to this region of the body.
- 4. After practicing a posture, a counter pose or equalising posture is carried out. For example, when one part of the body is flexed or contracted, then in the following Asana it is extended or stretched.

Health Benefits from the Regular Practice of Asanas

- Flexibility of the spine is increased
- The joints become more mobile
- The muscles are relaxed, toned and receive a plentiful supply of blood
- Organ and glandular activity is stimulated and regulated
- The lymphatic system and metabolism are stimulated
- The immune system is strengthened
- Circulation and blood pressure are normalised and stabilised
- The nervous system is calmed and strengthened
- The skin becomes clear and fresh

The second “pillar” of the Yoga exercises is PRANAYAMA

Pranayama is the conscious and deliberate control and regulation of the breath (Prana means breath, ayam means to control, to regulate). With each breath we absorb not only oxygen, but also Prana. Prana is cosmic energy, the power in the Universe that creates, preserves and changes. It is the basic element of life and consciousness. Prana is also found in food, therefore it is very important to have a healthy and wholesome vegetarian diet.

The conscious guidance of Prana in the body gives rise to an increase in vitality, physical detoxification and improved immunity, as well as the attainment of inner peace, relaxation and mental clarity.



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In mythology it is said that the length of a person's life is predetermined by the number of breaths. The Yogi tries to “conserve time” and lengthen life by slowing down the breath ^[1].

Effects of Pranayamas

Physical Effects

- Preservation of the body's health
- Purification of the blood
- Improvement in the absorption of oxygen
- Strengthening the lungs and heart
- Regulation of blood pressure
- Regulation of the nervous system
- Supporting the healing process and healing therapies
- Increasing resistance to infection

Mental Effects

- Elimination of stress, nervousness and depression
- Quietening of thoughts and emotions
- Inner balance
- Release of energy blockages

Spiritual Effects

- Deepening of meditation
- Awakening and purification of the Chakras (energy centres)
- Expansion of consciousness

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