

# PASCHIMA TAANAM

S. Ramaswami

One of the Asanas that comprehensively tests the will power, perseverance and endurance of an abhyasi is Paschima taanam, or the posterior stretching Asanam, the stretching extending from the toes upto the finger tips in one continuous movement. A highly beneficial posture, it improves circulation, muscle tone of a large group of posterior muscles when combined with its counter-pose or Pratikriya which is Purvataana Asanam. Almost all the texts on yoga refer to this asanam. It is also known as Paschima Uттаanaasanam, where the preposition 'Ut' is introduced indicating an upward pull of all posterior muscles. Another name by which it is known is Ugraasanam, which is indicative of the tremendous effort required in the initial stages to master it and the benefits of

muscular tone and strength it bestows. Brahmacharyaa-sanam is yet another name given to it. Evidently it helps in maintaining Brahmacharya and is foremost among those that awaken the Kundalini.

## BENEFICIAL ASANA

Paschimataanasanam is yet another posture that brings out the unique character of our Acharya's Yogic system. It is not merely sitting, stretching the legs and touching the toes as being generally understood. When done with vinyasas and corresponding breathing the Paschimataana group works on the complete system and the benefits mentioned in the yoga texts appear meaningful. Vinyasas and corresponding breathing kriyas are essential for aasana siddhi.

Prasaarya Bhuvii Paadau Tu  
Dorbhayaam Angushtam

Aadaraathi  
Jaanoopari Lalaatam Tu  
Paschimam Taanam Uchyate Iti

The above stanza appearing in Tri-Sikhi Braahmana Upanisad of Shukla Yajur Veda merely gives the basic description of the posture. It is to sit, extending the legs and keeping them straight. Then extending the arms, one should hold the big toes with the hooked fingers. Further extending the torso, one should bend down to keep the forehead on the knees. It is posterior stretching aasanam.

## METHODOLOGY

There are many variations in Paschimataanam. The most popular one described in the above Upanishad can be done in 16 steps, or vinyasas

STEP 1. Start from Samasthithi. Breathe normally for a few times.

STEP 2. Inhale, raise the arms overhead.

STEP 3. Exhale stretching from the hip, bend forward and keep the palms by the side of the feet and touching the knees with the forehead. This is Uttana Asana.

Some people do Utkataasanam. Now keep the palms by the side of the feet.

STEP 4. Exhale and hold the breath. Pressing the palms and after slightly bending the knees, jump back to attain chaturangadandaasana position, as described in the July 1977 issue of Indian Review.

One may reach this position from Utkataasanam also, by gently raising the buttocks and reaching a position half way between Utkataasanam and Uttanaasanam.

STEP 5. From Chaturangadandaasanam, inhale, pressing the palms, stretching the ankles and arching the back, bring the pelvis between the palms, supporting the body on palms and toes. This is Urdhwa mukhasana asanam.

STEP 6. Proceed to do Adhomukhasana asanam or exhalation.

STEP 7. Bending slightly the knees and holding the breath after inhalation, swing forward, first completely flexing the knees and extending them after crossing the supporting arms. Land on the ground with legs extended and the buttocks between the palms. This requires some guidance. In this position, pressing the palms, strengthen the back, by pushing the pelvis, the spine and chest forward and locking the chin. This is Dandaasanam, and finds reference in Vyaasa Bhashya of Paatanjala Yoga Darshanam. Now inhale raise the arm, stretching the shoulders and neck also in the process. Stay for a few breaths focussing attention on the tip of the nose.

STEP 8. Now exhaling extend the arms forward, pushing the pelvis and spine, hold the big toes with the thumb, and the next two fingers forming a hook, pressing all the while the posterior portion of the legs against the ground.

STEP 9. After a few breaths, further extension may be attempted. Exhaling and spreading the elbows, one should lower the torso, so that the forehead is placed between straight knees. This is Paschimataanaasanam.

Prasaarya Paadau Bhuvu Danda-  
roopau  
Sanyastha Bhaaichhite yugma  
Madhye I

retneha Paadam ana Jirutaau  
Karaabhyam  
Yogeन्द्रapeetam Paschimot-  
tanamaahuhu II

The above stanza by Gherunda admits the necessity of repeated efforts (yetna) in achieving the posture. In the initial stages, it may be difficult even to sit in Dandasanam with arms raised. Back, thighs, the stubborn hamstrings, and the ankles refuse to budge. But with deeper exhalation, relaxed concentration, perseverance and some coaxing by the abhyasa, the muscles slowly yield and after considerable practice the posture may be achieved fairly comfortably.

One may stay in the asanam for a few breaths or even up to a few minutes. It will be possible only when one starts to enjoy the posture, which is evidently the case as described by Svaatmaarama in Hathayoga-pradeepika as follows:

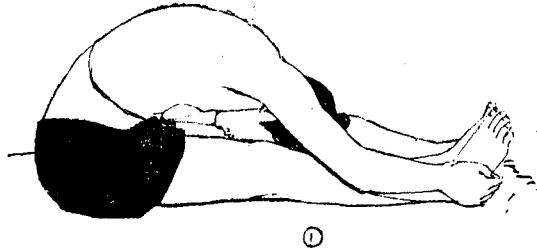
Prasaarya Paadau Bhuvu Danda-  
rupau  
Dorbhyaam Padagradwityayam  
grihitwa I  
Jaanooopari nyastha Lalaatadesa  
Vasethidam Paschimataana-  
maahuhu II

Here the author recommends the abhyasa to stay in the posture. By "vaseth" one should infer a considerable length of time.

Adepts may proceed to do further extension of the posterior muscles.

**STEP 10.** After some practice one may keep the chin in the knees looking ahead the toes. A further extension will require keeping the forehead on the shin, about 3" away from the knees. Variation in the hand positions are also possible. Keeping the full palm on the ground, holding the heels (refer to sketch 1), keeping the fingers interlocked and turned outward and kept around the soles, keeping the palms on the ground, clasping one wrist with other hand are some of the variations. It can be also done without support of the arms (niraalamba), such as keeping the arms extended from the shoulder level, keeping the palms clasped behind the head as mentioned in Siva Samhita, keeping them together as in "Pranaam" behind the back, etc.

**STEP 11.** One may attempt to balance in the posture by keeping the palms by the side of the thighs and raising the body. Readers may find its similarity with a certain exercise in parallel bar in gymnastics. In fact, our Acharya contends that some of the Yogis have actually invented many gymnastic aids and as such it is highly probable that basically gymnastics is an offshoot of yoga and at least the basis was provided by yoga, even as gymnastics these days appe-



ars to be far different from yoga. This exercise is known as Utpluthi and may be attempted in many other sitting postures like Padmaasanam, Simhaasanam, etc.

**STEP 12.** Keeping the palms by the side of the hips, return to Chaturangandasasanam.

**STEP 13.** To 16 are actually retracing the path via Urdhwamukhaswaanasanam, Adhomukham, Uttanasanam, Taadasanam and samasthithi.

**BENEFITS:** This asanam is highly beneficial for general improvement in circulation, muscle tone and strength and improves function of all abdominal and pelvic organs, the kidneys and the spine. It is said to improve vitality, correct certain cases of impotency due to increased vascularity of the organs of genito urinary tract, and paradoxically helps control sex (Retha skhalanam) and hence is known as Bhrahmacharyasanam. All

the posterior muscle groups and joints as the heels, calf muscles, the stubborn hamstrings, the knees, thigh muscles, gluteal, lumbo sacral, spine, shoulders, neck, arms, wrists and even knuckles get stretched.

There is hardly any yoga text that does not refer to this posture, and give a clue to the benefits, of course using the peculiar language used by ancient yogis.

### HATHAYOGAPRADEEPIKA

This important asanam (asanaamaagrayam) paschimatanam, makes the wind or force (Pavana) flow through the Sashumna and stimulates the gastric fire (Jataraanala), reduces the abdomen (kaarsyam Udare) and makes one free from disease (Arogaatam).

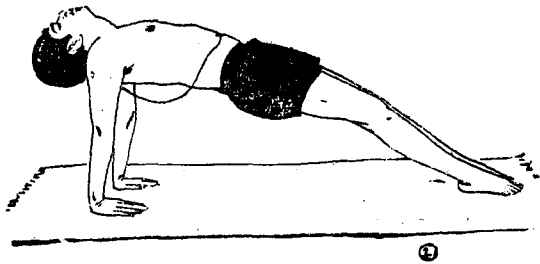
**SIVA SAMHITA:** Stretch out both legs and keep them apart (slightly). Firmly take hold of the head by the hands, and place it between the knees. This is called

Ugraasanam, said to be the best among asanas, and improves the movement of bodily forces (Anila); known also as Paschima Uttaanaasanam, it removes lethargy and weakness (deha Avasaana-haranam). Discriminating Abhyaasi should master this beneficial posture by daily (Pratyaham) practice. It makes vaayu flow in the posterior regions and makes one strong. Those who practice it with diligence find all sidhis generated in themselves. Hence by self effort the yogi should master the posture. This should be kept secret with great care and not given out indiscriminately. Through it, vayusiddhi, or activation of all pranas (metabolism, circulation, respiration) takes place and it destroys multitudes of miseries.

Gherunda refers to the posture as the king of all sitting postures (Yogindra-peetam).

### THE COUNTER POSES

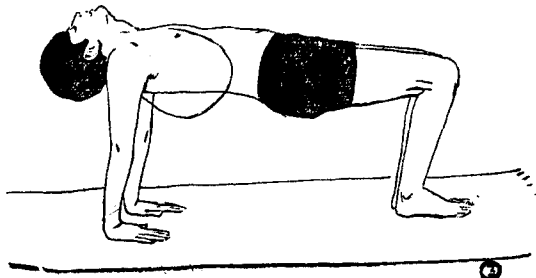
Since the above is a strenuous exercise, it requires a counterpose to normalise. Purvataanam or anterior stretching pose helps not only relieve the strain, but also stretch the anterior muscles and thus completes the involvement of all the major group muscles.



**PROCEDURE:** Proceed from Dandaasanam. Keep the palms by the side of the buttocks or about one foot behind the buttocks. Pressing the palms and heels inhale and raise the trunk as high as possible, stretching the ankles and keeping the feet on the ground, also keeping the knees straight and stretched. Refer to sketch (2). Exhale return to starting position. One may repeat the posture a few times, and later stay for a few breaths in the posture. It is a very good stretching movement involving the anterior portions of ankles, shin, knees, thighs pelvis, abdomen, chest, neck, shoulders' arms and wrists. The raising of the trunk may be done in Langanakriya by obese persons.

### CHATUSHPAADAPETAM

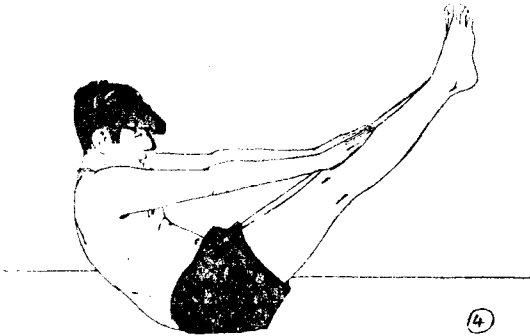
Since in both the above postures, the knees are kept straight, to release the knee strain, another posture, chatushpaadapeetam, can be taken up as part of the same group of asanas. From Dandaasanam, exhale and bend the knees, keeping the feet in front of the buttocks. Inhale, pressing the palms and feet and raise the trunk, keeping it parallel to the



ground. Inhale and return. Repeat a few times. One may stay also for a few breaths. In this a better stretching of the shoulders and neck is possible, so also the hip joint which is exercised better. It may be done as Langanakriya. Refer to sketch (3). Since it resembles a table it is called Chatuspaadapeetam or four legged seat.

**NAAVAASANAM:** From the starting point of Chatuspaadapeetam, inhale, pressing the palms, stretch the legs at about 60 degrees to the ground. Now balancing on the buttocks, lift the hands and stretch them in front as shown in sketch (4). Stay for a few seconds and return to the original position. This may be repeated a few times. It is known as Naavaasanam or boat posture.

The above group can be done in one continuous stretch, and then one may take rest in Savaasanam. For the majority who have difficulty in doing Paschimataanaasanam, a few methods are suggested to get some mobility of the stubborn hip joints. One may start from lying down posture, with arms overhead, exhale, pressing the heels and buttock, raise the trunk and bend forward to the extent possible and hold the ankles or toes. Inhale and return to lying position. This may be repeated

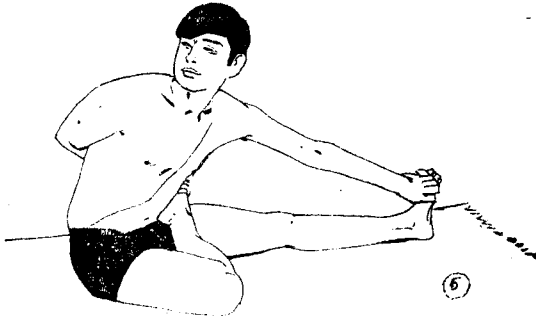


(4)

a few times. One may start also from Halaasanam. From Halaasana, inhale raise arms overhead and touch the toes. Inhale roll back to lying position and in a continuous motion, exhale and do Paschimataana as mentioned earlier. One may repeat a few times. These dynamic movements help to exercise the posterior muscles paving the way for achieving the posture.

There are a number of muscles, tendons which are seldom exercised. Thus the

yogis have invented a number of hybrid postures so that those unused fibers are exercised and put to work. Many such postures are in vogue. Combining Paschimataanaasanam and Baddhapadmaasanam gives Ardhha Baddha Padma Paschimataanaam a vinyasa which is given in sketch (5). Similarly we have Mahaamudra which can be looked upon as a combination of Baddhakonasana and Paschimataanaam. When continued with Vira, we have Triyangmukhejkapaadam and so on.



(5)

