

Prelude To Practice of Asanas

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Jivamani Bhrajatphana Sahasra Vidhruta Viswam
Bhavamandalaya Anantaya Nagarajaya Namaha !!

It has been mentioned that the goal of Yoga is total independence of Purusha and is achieved by the cessation of all mental changes that one normally experiences. It requires enormous practice of the mind to transcend the distracted states to become alive to stillness. The Ashtanga Yoga is the means to reduce the distractions and is a logical, step by step approach towards that end.

These distractions can be broadly classified into three. Those arising out of (a) external world (b) one's own body (c) the mind pregnant with previous samskaras. Yama and Niyama are the two angas which, if practised, reduce the afflictions (klesa) arising out of exter-

nal stimuli. They are, firstly Ahimsa or non-violence towards all beings and according to Patanjali, all beings reciprocate genuine non-violence towards the Abhyasi and in his presence also lose enmity among themselves. Satya is thinking and speaking the Truth, which will lead to a perfect correlation between deed and results. Asthaya is non-stealing, or a trusteeship approach towards wealth and earning out of honest and prescribed duty (Nijakarma). Paradoxically such a person comes to manage wealth. Strength is acquired by Brahmacharya or controlled sex within the institution of marriage. Non-possession or Aparigraha frees the mind from the worries of losing wealth and

helps in one becoming a futurist. According to our Acharya, Brahmacharya is the most beneficial and feasible yama in Kali yuga.

NIYAMAS

The five Niyamas include Soucha or cleanliness which leads to a heathly life and prevents diseases arising out of close contact with people at large.

Out of contentment (Satosha) arises immense mental peace (sukha). It is said in Manusmriti that the happiness arising out of fulfilment of desires - either here or hereafter - is not comparable even to a sixteenth part (Shodasim Kalaam) of that experienced by the reduction of desire itself.

Yeth cha^a Kama sukham
 Loke
 Yeth cha Divyam Mahat
 sukham!
 Trushna Akshaya Sukhas-
 yete
 Na Arhatah Shodasim
 Kalaam!!

Tapas which is moderation in speech and food helps to make the body and senses more sensitive. Swadhyaya or study of the scriptures, the Karma and Devata portions, presumably, will help one get direct perception of the Devata contemplated. And out of an attitude of surrender to the Universal Lord (Isvara pranidhana), including all dharmic actions and their results, prepares the mind for intense concentration (samadhi).

PREREQUISITES

Some reflection on the above Yamaniyamas will indicate that these practices and attitudinal changes, are necessary and sufficient prerequisites before the other Bahirangasadhanas are contemplated. What is called for is a deliberate attempt to practice them so that one is disturbed minimally by the external world. It is however easier said than done.

Patanjali recognizes such a difficulty as mainly due to our childhood habits and conditioning. To help the

Yogabhyasi, who is earnest, he suggests keeping in the back of the mind that one has taken to yoga as a deliberate attempt to attain peace of mind. All actions inconsistent with the yama niyamas are motivated by greed (Lobha), enmity (Krodha) or infatuation (Moha), and will lead only to misery (Dukka), confusion (Agnana), which will be endless (Anantaphala). All attempts at yogabhyasa without these prerequisites will be useless and benefits, if any, will only be temporary. Practice of mere asanas without change in the food habits and other attitudinal changes are perhaps the cause of disenchantment of many who attempt at yogasanas. Of the yamaniyamas, Tapas and Brahmacharya are perhaps the most important and relevant, as they have also a direct bearing on the physical condition of the Yogabhyasi. Without Tapas one becomes obese, suffers from many ailments of stomach. It is not possible to do asanas with a sick stomach. Similarly without Brahmacharya at least in the beginning one will not be able to do Mula-bandha, which is the first step in the higher benefits of Yogabhyasa.

The next set of distractions are of the body and Patanjali uses Asanas to get over them. By means of practice, it is possible to remain in a

particular posture-comfortable and steady.

Asanas are to be practised at a quiet, clean place. The beginning of summer, especially for those suffering from respiratory ailments and that of rainy season are suggested for starting yogasanabhyasa.

ASANAS ARE MANY

It is said that asanas are innumerable. Yoga texts mention that there are as many asanas as there are species.

Asanani cha Tavanti
 Yavanto Tivasasayah !

But presently, about 80 asanas or so are generally in vogue. It is said that our Acharya has in his repertory nearly 700 asanas. In olden days, generally, people were eradicating and preventing diseases by means of asanas and pranayamas. It is said that those ailments-chronic that are not curable by medical sciences (Vaidya sastra) and drugs, should be cured by asanas and pranayamas. Unfortunately, during the dark centuries in the past, many of our ancient scriptures on Yoga and therapy are lost.

It is recommended that practice of Yoga asanas should be started with a prayer possibly the one appearing at the beginning of this article.

The practice of asanas is getting to be popular again,

after a lapse of a number of a years. The acceptance in the west, especially among scientists and doctors, of Yoga as a subject of great significance has, it is to be admitted' given a fillip to the practice of asanas in India as well. However, the mechanical approach to the practice of asanas, as achieving a particular pose, - somehow - will not give the necessary results.

The study of Vedas (adh-yayana) has to be done with Udatta, anudatta and swarita notes. Otherwise it is merely prosaic. This saswara chanting of Vedic texts has been going on from time immemorial. Nobody can think of it otherwise. Similarly with our musical system, it is music, only if it is sung with shruti, layam, dhrutam, anudhrutam etc. For poetry, one has to stick to chandas, yati, prasa etc. If one takes to mantra upasana, the various nyasas of anga, kara, sarira, kala, jiva, Matruka, Tattwa etc. are to be observed for the fruition of the upasanas.

But in yogabhyasa, the present day approach to the practice of yoga asanas and pranayama is without the preparations and variations or vinyasas. Without the Vinyasas, the asana practice is only as good as any other physical activity. It is little use if one learns a dozen well-known asanas and practises them without the vinyasas.

It is my Acharya's contention that the disillusionment of many yogabhyasis is due to practice of asanas without the yamas, niyamas, vinyasas' synchronous breathing, the accompanying bandhas and with a greed for quick results.

BREATHING PATTERNS

Yet another factor of importance in asanas is the use of breath in all the vinyasas and asanas. Here also, many schools teach yoga without any relation to breathing in asanas practice and actually discourage the use of breath, on the plea that the practice of breathing is a separate aspect, dealt with in Pranayama. However, it is found in actual practice that synchronous breathing pattern in Vinyasa as an abhyasa is necessary to attain the desired results. Patanjali in the Yogasutras mentions about it to achieve asana siddhi-which is steadiness and comfort in asanas.

Prayatna Saithilya Ananta samapathibhyam!!

By Prayatna is meant effort of life (Jivana prayatna) which is breath. Long and fine breathing is therefore Prayatna Saithilya. Texts like Yoga Kurantam, Vriddha Vasishtam etc. emphasise this aspect. Further, Patanjali also suggests fixing of the mind on Ananta. The word Ananta

literally means infinity and certain schools suggest one should concentrate on infinity, which to say the least is absurd for practice for a yogabhyasi. Ananta is Nagaraja or Adisesha and since Patanjali is the incarnation of Adisesha, one should contemplate on the figure of Nagaraja or Patanjali. This will be the traditional approach. Thus while practising asanas, by means of purposeful breathing and mind fixity, one gets steadiness and relaxation in asana practice. From Asana siddhi, one is not affected by pyreia or hypothermia, or any other opposing conditions, physical or mental.

Tataha Dwandwan Anabhi-gataha!!

IN ASANA PRACTICE

There are four factors in yogic breathing. First is Pura-ka or inhalation. Then holding of breath after inhalation, called Antahkumbhaka. Controlled exhalation is called Rechaka and holding the breath out-as it were-is Bah-ya kumbhaka.

All the movements in yoga-bhyasa are done deliberately and with a specified aspect of breathing. There are some movements which are done always while inhaling and there are others which are done only while breathing

out. Then one could stay in a posture while holding the breath-in or out-or could do controlled cycle of yogic breathing in the posture. But there are some movements which can be done either doing breathing in or breathing out, depending upon the condition of the abhyasi, and the desired results from the practice. Making the movements, during inhalation and holding the breath in will come under Brahmana kriya and doing the movements while breathing out and holding the breath out is langana kriya.

While in Ayurveda, Brahmana kriya refers to nourishing diet for growth and langana kriya to fasting, they are not as revelant in yoga-bhyasa. The kriyas in Sattvic yoga practice is the use of natural air in clearing the nadis and not the use of cloth or water and other external aids.

YOGA IS AN ART

Breathing in asanas helps to relax and reach the final posture. It helps to reach out and work on the deeper muscles, which may not be possible otherwise. Further, it has been found that with deliberate breathing, one's mind is not allowed to wander but forced to follow the breath. Yoga practice becom-

es much more purposeful. In fact the author of Yoga Rahasya has 16 chapters, each called a kala and as such Yoga is an art, as well. Like in music, one has to develop a sensitivity with deliberate practice and intense concentration. Short yoga courses for a fortnight or so, done without the disciplines of yama niyamas and without vinyasas, counterposes or pratikriyas, Bandhas, Mudras and specific concentration excrcises and conscious breathing will leave little impression on an earnest yogabhyasi and let him go disheartened.

THE COUNTERPOSES

Yogasanas like medicine, have good effects but some also have side effects, which are mainly physical. To counteract them every involved asana has a Pratikriyasana or a counterpose, which helps to preserve the efforts of the main asana and counteract the undesirable aspects. For instance, Sirasasana has many advantages. But this has to be followed by sarvangasana, as a Pratikriya, and so on. One has to see the effects of the main asana and its counterpose to feel the difference as compared to practising without the use of counterpose.

Apart from the emphasis on conscious breathing in

asanas, as one advances in the asana practice, the use of Bandhas or contracting a specific group of muscles is recommended for the higher benefits of yoga. Of the many bandhas, three are important. The Mulabandha requires the drawing in of the rectum, the pelvic diaphragm and the lower abdomen as if to touch the backbone. This has to be done after exhalation. It could be observed that at least in the initial stages, one has to practice 'Brahmacharya' to attain a mastery over Mula-bandha.

The Uddiyanabandha is the drawing in of the naval region again as if to touch the back and raising the diaphragm, so that the abdominal region becomes scaphoid. It is obvious that people who are obese will not be able to do Uddiyanabandha satisfactorily and hence the need for diet control or Tapas.

The Jalandhara Bandha is stretching the neck and pressing the chin against the breastbone, about three inches below the neck. This effectively controls air passage during breathing and is a great aid in Pranayama. These three Bandhas (Bandha trayas) are improtant in the practice of asanas. It may not be possible for beginners to practice at the start but will have to do it along as they progress. It should be noted,

however, that they are not to be attempted without the guidance of a competent teacher who himself has practised and mastered them.

Svatmarama, the author of Hathayogapradipika mentions that irrespective of age and physical condition, any one can start on Yoga, but regular practice alone gives the benefits (siddhi).

Yuva Vrudho athi vridho
va
Vyadhito Durlabhopi va !
Abhyasath Siddhim apnothi
Sarvayogesha atandri-
taha !

FOR CHILDREN TOO

It should be mentioned that yoga is useful to children and women as well. Traditionally, in India, among Hindus, children at the age of 5 or 7 were initiated into Vedic karma after Upanayana, Sandhya includes, asanas like Utkatasana, Uttanasana, Padmasana etc., pranayama

and mantra meditation. Thus it is apparent that children were practising yoga in olden days.

Regarding the controversy of whether women are fit for integral yoga, there is ample evidence to show that interested women were initiated to yoga. Yagnyavalkya and Siva Samhita, two of the authentic texts on yoga, are actually the teachings of Maharshi Yagnyavalkya to his spouse Maitreyi and Lord Siva to Goddess Parvati. Further in Yoga Rahasya, Nathamuni, the great teacher of the Natha sect of yogis, specifies a few asanas like Panchakonasanas as aiding development of foetus and certain asanas like Pasasana are said to prevent conception (garbhanirodha). Further there are a number of asanas and pranayamas that could be useful for gynaecological disorders like prolapse, post-natal disorders, menorrhagia, dysmenorrhoea etc. One can say that there is yoga for

everyone.

Summing up, it may be said that Yogasanas should be practised according to sampradaya or tradition, to attain the benefits mentioned in the texts. The paddhathi of our Acharya requires that one should practise asanas with the necessary constraints (Yamaniyamas) as prerequisites, with progressions and variations (vinyasa), corresponding synchronous and conscious breathing, interspersed with stipulated counterposes and counter movements (Pratikriya), 'imaging' Ananta and with the Bandhas and Mudras.

There are many ways of classifying asanas. However, for simplicity, they could be grouped into standing, sitting, prone, supine or balancing. I propose to take up standing asanas in the next issue with the important vinyasas and suggested kriyas (breathing) and pratikriyas.



