

Series on the viniyoga of Āsana

- *Āsana offers a purpose more than just physical.*
- *Āsana offers a link of the mind to the physical.*
- *Āsana introduces the concept of dhyāna as a practice.*
- *Āsana seeks to minimise the saṃskāra or habitual patterns which dull the mind.*
- *In doing so it seeks to increase our sensitivity to ourselves, what is around us and its corresponding influences, and to what sustains us.*

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1. The Definition of Āsana according to Haṭha and Rāja Yoga

HATĦA YOGA PRADĪPIKĀ Chapter I verse 17

KURYĀT TAD ĀSANAM STHAIRYAM AROGYAM CĀṄGA LĀGHAVAN I

Āsana Practice brings increased steadiness, less illness and a lightness of limb.

YOGA SŪTRA Chapter II verse 46

STHIRA SUKHAM ĀSANAM I

Āsana needs to combine qualities of steady attentiveness (sthira) and spacious clarity (sukha).

Here we are given definitions that relate more to goals and fruits rather than actual practice guidelines.

Although it could be added that the definitions also relate to ones Āsana practice as a whole.

The next post will be around the many approaches to Āsana practice.

2. There are Many Approaches to Āsana Practice

To consider this aspect we need to look at different approaches to āsana practice using as examples the viewpoints of different schools of practice to what are seen by many as the two primary 'classical' āsana.

For example:

- If you want to use śīrṣāsana (headstand) and sarvāṅgāsana (shoulderstand) you just go ahead and use them.
- You must master all the standing āsana before you use śīrṣāsana and sarvāṅgāsana.
- You must build up to use śīrṣāsana and sarvāṅgāsana at the end of the practice as the 'climax' of your efforts.
- You must start with śīrṣāsana and sarvāṅgāsana with the practice leading towards standing āsana.
- You must always use sūrya namaskāram before you use śīrṣāsana and sarvāṅgāsana.
- You must be able to do all the counterposes and preparations before attempting śīrṣāsana and sarvāṅgāsana.

From these examples we are led to the belief that we must respect that there are various schools of thought around the principles of practice of āsana.

The next post will raise questions around the principles of āsana practice.

3. The Principles used in Constructing an Āsana Practice

So how have the various schools of Yoga come to ideas of using rest, preparation, counterpose, etc as planning principles in the practice of āsana?

Also if we have certain principles underpinning how we work, how do we apply them to students already set in a particular mode of āsana practice?

For example:

- Perhaps if they have a physical problem then you have something to work with. However you need to be tactful about pointing such things out, maybe waiting.
- Otherwise you can try to meet them halfway i.e. adding a couple of things to their practice they know and a couple they don't.

If they have been practising in this way for several years what does it matter if it takes several months to influence their āsana practice.

We must consider what is acceptable to each and everybody as basic principles of āsana practice.

The next post will consider the direction of one's āsana practice.

4. Considerations around the Direction of Āsana Practice

As well as considering what is acceptable to each and everybody as basic principles of āsana practice, we must consider the direction of one's āsana practice.

For example:

- Where are we or they starting from?
- Where are we or they are going to?
- Is this journey of change (pariṇāma) working with Immediate needs in mind?
- Is this journey of change (pariṇāma) working with Long Term needs in mind?
- Is this journey of change (pariṇāma) trying to integrate both Immediate Needs and Long Term needs?

In addition to these aspects we must also consider:

- The Starting Point or what has happened before the āsana practice?
- Does the intended process of pariṇāma through āsana integrate what has happened before?
- The Finishing Point or what will happen after the āsana practice?
- Does the intended process of pariṇāma through āsana integrate what will happen after the practice?

Furthermore there are additional considerations:

- Given the range of students in a group class there will be more potential differences in what has happened before the āsana practice.
- Given the range of students in a group class there will be more potential differences in what will happen after the āsana practice.

Hence the maxim from T Krishnamacharya around the concept of the viniyoga (application) of Yoga, in that the āsana practice should be adapted to the student rather than adapting the student to the āsana practice.

This maxim also emphasises the differences in potentials between group class and individual teaching environments. The teaching of students within a 121 environment optimises the possibilities in meeting their directional and practice needs.

For example in considering:

- Immediate Needs
- Long Term Needs
- What has happened before the āsana practice
- What will happen after the āsana practice

The next post will consider the common points amidst the variables around students and their āsana practice.

5. What are the Common Points within the Variables in Āsana Practice

If we look at all the variables around āsana practice we can find some similarities between individuals.

For example:

- The variable must accept and include a persons previous training
- We must respect where a person is coming or starting from
- It is better to consider the immediate situation rather than the long term
- We must respect the after effect of the āsana practice
- We must respect the after action to come
- We must respect the travel from A to Z or upāya (means)
- Z seems to vary much more than A

i.e. Practice in the morning – generally less variables. Practice in the evening – more subject to the days effects and different lifestyles

- We must respect age, condition, gender, work, lifestyle, etc
- It is also necessary to consider some technicalities

The next post will consider questions around the planning of an appropriate āsana practice.

6. Planning an Āsana Practice

In this post we will consider questions around the planning of an appropriate āsana practice.

For example how would we consider the following situation:

- Rising at 6.30am
- Stiff neck
- Stiff legs
- Nostrils blocked
- Stomach pain
- Head heavy
- Business meeting at 8.30am (15' drive)

We can find out how much time is available, say 40'.

Now we can prepare a practice.

Whatever principles you use there are certain things that must happen.

However we should have respect for:

- The body
- The state you are in that day
- What you have to do after the practice
- How long you have for the practice

Yet most people don't or are not able to consider these points.

In fact it could be said that we have only one body and it has the same characteristics.

i.e. Position of joints, limbs, organs, muscles.

Thus we should approach the practice from this direction.

We accept that there are certain standard areas in the body, yet we should have some values.

The body is the constant, yet there are some variables.

How can we adapt a procedure which takes care of both the constant and the variables within an āsana practice?

This will be discussed further when we look at the basic principles.

These principles will help in considering what is the best approach.

An approach that will respect that pariṇāma (change) is to happen.

The way we travel must tell us that it is safe and there must be a built in safety factor to indicate any adverse or negative effects.

The next post will consider the types of postural activity for students in their āsana practice.

7. Different Types of Activity in Āsana Practice

Generally in terms of āsana practice we can consider two types of physical activity

- Dynamic or Movement and Stay or Static.

Dynamic is the movement aspect of an āsana or posture.

(Some āsana are more suited to Movement or Dynamic Work)

For Example:

Stay is the Static aspect of an āsana or posture.

(Some āsana are more suited to Stay or Static Work)

For Example:

Dynamics are the initial way of assessing what is what in the body, in the breath and in the mind.

You can't just press a button and get into and out of an āsana, you have to move.

So there is a starting point in the practice of āsana.

(My notes from these particular group of study lessons has little on this particular aspect as its such an important principle of practice and practice planning and was thus covered elsewhere in great depth.)

(This and other primary practice principles will be expanded upon in future different and more detailed posts.)

The next post will consider the question of Voluntary and Involuntary effort for students in their āsana practice.

8. Voluntary and Involuntary Effects in a students Āsana Practice

As well as the consideration around the use of dynamic and/or static āsana there is also the voluntary effort and/or involuntary response depending on your background to āsana practice.

According to the impact of this background certain voluntary efforts trigger certain involuntary responses.

This can also apply to our attitude whilst working in a particular āsana.

i.e. Involuntary response is a result of memory.

So we can have a defect we are unaware of in the position of the arms, legs, body, as well as attitude, etc.

We need to apply voluntary movements to influence the quality of the āsana.

Also certain steps have to be taken to avoid, anticipate or compensate for the effects of the involuntary response.

This means certain steps have to be taken to consider the voluntary intention and the potential involuntary response.

From this we can evolve certain suggestions with regard to potential (unconscious) practice patterns.

Thus with these two aspects there are a lot of variables.

i.e. Using or not using the breath can be voluntary or involuntary.

Thus if you are not used to using the breath in an āsana and its quality is affected involuntarily, then we must apply a voluntary action to improve or sustain the quality of the breath.

Or if we are used to using the breath the way we use it can become fixed and unchanging – an involuntary effect

The next post will look at a third factor besides involuntary actions and voluntary effort, namely a persons responses to the above situation.

9. Responses and Respect

There is also a third factor besides voluntary and involuntary, this is a persons response.

In the travel from everyday postures to Yoga postures we have to consider the idea of responses.

We can often ignore the response of the body in our aim for ideals, such as in āsana.

Voluntary and involuntary are the variables.

Responses should be looked at according to the psychological attitude of the individual.

We need to consider what is the end and what are the means. This is also seen as cause and effect.

The responses to the voluntary action should be considered as a safety valve.

All this assumes we have respect for the individual and the individual has or develops respect for themselves.

Psychological Aspect

Voluntary (controlled action) and involuntary (action without conscious control) **both** have positive and negative aspects.

A person who has a particular problem would come voluntarily. However their action in response to what we ask them to do is involuntary. So we have to consider a persons responses.

i.e. These are not normal responses when we travel from

So:

1. āsana are considered as voluntary phenomena like writing with your opposite hand. This it is an action which requires conscious control.
2. When you are used to going from everyday postures to Yoga postures they become automatic in use. Thus they become involuntary.
3. We must consider our normal posture which is usually standing or sitting.

Thus we have a gap from this to the main āsana we intend to use. **How** can we bridge the gap?

Principles of practice are ways to bridge the gaps. We must be able to reach an āsana with conscious control and be happy with it.

Āsana are not automatic but can become so. The tragedy of voluntary action in things is that we get used to them and they have no effect.

With this the risk factor is increased as well.

So what is voluntary and what is involuntary is completely different when there is a 'new' response.

By increasing awareness we are creating a situation for new responses to occur.

The next post will consider the question of safety factors in relation to guidelines for āsana practice.

10. Safety Factors

Along with creating a situation for new responses to occur any guidelines must also consider the safety factor.

This is helped by being able to distinguish characteristics between say:

bhujaṅgāsana and paścimatānāsana

Thus an elementary knowledge of what happens in the body is required.

For example we have:

śīrṣāsana and padmāsana

Because of being able to do these these āsana a person wants to do padmāsana in śīrṣāsana, exploring an āsana known as viparīta padmāsana.

However one has to know the factors involved.

For example it could be approached by working dynamically from ardha padma sarvāṅgāsana into:

ardha padma halāsana

This would ascertain the ability to work into and with padmāsana in an inverted āsana such as śīrṣāsana.

One cannot assume that because two things are right a third will follow automatically.

Thus any āsana practice must allow for certain safety factors, so we are able to work with respect or regard for the individual and retain safety factors.

The next post will explore the question of compromise.

11. Compromise

Working with safety factors brings in another factor to consider.

This is the element of compromise in the body. This is often something you don't see.

For example a movement of the head in sarvāṅgāsana.

Thus the body tells us something but we are not always aware of what it is. This can be the result of factors in ones life.

For example:

- Age
- Profession
- Activities

And, as said, it can often show in ways we cannot see.

For example:

- position of feet
- Tension in face
- Position of hands
- Angle of shoulders
- Angle of arms

So we must respect our limitations as well as our assets. This also applies that as a teacher we should be aware of the students limitations.

These are variables according to person, climate, environment, etc. They are not constant and neither are the effects. This compromise can react in many ways.

For example:

- You put your mind in one place during an āsana, the body compensates and places the escape elsewhere.

It is the teacher that usually observes the escape rather than the area of the body where the mind is.

This is another example of an involuntary response to a voluntary movement.

There are certain responses to voluntary movements, these can be voluntary (conscious) or involuntary (unconscious).

For example in āsana what we try to do can have a response:

- In what we want to happen
- In what we don't want to happen

Voluntary things become involuntary then you lose touch with what is happening.

If you are doing the same āsana practice, over a long period of time, it is not the same because it becomes a habit. In this it can have a different effect to what is required.

Thus when you design an āsana practice for a long period you should be very careful. In this instance you should compromise and build in a safety factor.

We can either respect our limits or else overwork then and create a need to rectify. This is where the idea of using the same āsana practice all the time is limited.

The next post will explore the idea of adapting the āsana practice.

12. Adaptation of Āsana Practice

The question that arises here is how to relate the idea of adapting the practice to the peaks and troughs of the body?

Combining adaptation also with the idea of using the value of constants to understand the movements of peaks and troughs in the body.

No practice is ever the same over a period of days.

There are variations in the body's physiology and breath, (notwithstanding mental patterns, emotional flows) etc.

There are always changes or pariṇāma.

However we can be over-adaptable trying to meet the changes in the body.

(My notes from these particular group of study lessons has little on this particular aspect as the twin arts of modification and variation of āsana, collectively known as adaptation, are such important principles of practice and practice planning and were thus covered elsewhere in great depth.)

(This and other primary practice principles will be expanded upon in future different and more detailed posts.)

The next post will consider the role of the āsana in our practice.

13. The Role of Āsana

Perhaps at this point we need to consider what is the role of the practice of āsana.

For example:

- Ritual
- Physical problem
- Recreational activity
- Self realisation
- Prepare for prāṇāyāma
- Something else

Thus the roles are many.

There is also the negative approach to the practice of āsana.

However āsana practice that promotes well being in the individual must be acceptable and beneficial.

This is one more reason why we should investigate the the principles in practice planning.

- The changes in the body are many
- The changes in the mind are many

How to meet these changes and promote well being in our practice?

The next post will summarise the ideas on how to practice and link to the principles of āsana practice.

14. Summary of Ideas on how to Practice

To override these principles is not to consider that there are many variables.

We must go back to these principles for the practice of āsana.

For example:

- Variables as Assets
- Variables as Limitations
- Voluntary movement
- Involuntary movement
- Responses
- Respect
- Safety factors
- Compromise

For all of these you need to use:

- Preparatory Movements
- Compensatory Movements
- Dynamic Movements
- Static Movements
- Appropriate Modification
- Appropriate Variation
- Appropriate Breathing Patterns
- Appropriate Sequence Building
- Appropriate Rest
- Correct Termination

(My notes from these particular group of study lessons has little on each of these particular aspects as they are such important principle of practice and practice planning and were each thus covered elsewhere in great depth.)

(These primary practice principles will be expanded upon in future different and more detailed posts.)

The next and final post will summarise this particular series on the viniyoga of Āsana by offering guidelines to the practice of āsana.

15. Guidelines to the Practice of Āsana

Yoga states that āsana must not be neglected, it is a valid tool which needs a precise application whilst respecting the following guidelines:

- Most of the āsana are not close to the postures of the body we use in our daily life/activity.
- Āsana practice seems to mean different things to different people.
- It is known that different cultures and life styles exist in different parts of the world.
- These days people begin āsana practice at different stages of their life.
- The body undergoes many changes and then there are many influences on it through one's job, interest and otherwise.
- It can be said no human body is perfect. As such there are definitely certain vulnerable parts and some strong aspects.
- When the body gets used to certain things, less awareness about them seem to happen.
- There is also a restrictive fight-flight response which, in no time, can change the whole morphology of the body.
- It is not humanly possible to adapt āsana practice to respect all the above considerations.
- A safe compromise that produces certain positive effects and limits negative effects is the only proper alternative.
- The principles we follow in the practice of āsana are a fair attempt in this direction.

(These primary principles of āsana practice will be expanded upon in future different and more detailed posts.)

Extracts from my notes from my 121 Studies in India with TKV Desikachar whilst resident in Madras 1979-1981.