

The role of Yoga-Asanas in *Mind-body Harmony*

by

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1 Abstract:

In this article an introduction to the origin of Yoga and its scientific analysis from Maharshi Patanjali is provided. How mind-body harmony could be achieved through practice of yoga is illustrated by the scientific approach of Yoga. According to Maharshi Patanjali, the main goal of Yoga is to free your mind from all suffering in order to finally achieve universal consciousness. To reach this state, Patanjali advocates the practice of astanga yoga meaning the eight-fold path. In this article, one of the eight fold path, “asana”, which refers to the practice of postures for achieving stability and firmness of the body both physically and psychologically, is emphasized. Included in this discussion is how “Prana” referring to vital force plays an important role. In this article there is no attempt to illustrate all the different steps of performing Yoga-Asanas. However, the benefits of practicing the major asanas can provide a path to a curative and preventive measure for all physical and/or psychological issues. Thus the practice of Yoga-Asanas with proper breathing taught by an expert can provide mind-body balance.

2 Introduction

Yoga-Asanas are an ancient form of exercise and healing that originated in India more than 5,000 years ago. Yoga-Asanas can help create a flexible body, improve cardiovascular respiration, increase relaxation, help handle stress gracefully as well as teach you how to achieve inner peace and focus your energies on bringing mind and body together in balance. Babies are born with the flexibility to pull their toes up to their ears. As we grew, we lose this flexibility by putting ourselves in a stressful environment, having negative thoughts, and losing the balance between mind and body. By practicing yoga, you can restore the balance between mind and body. Yoga is famous for its ability to heal, bring peace of mind and achieve the original state of being, one of unperturbed peace and joy.

Asana, referring to pose or posture and prana meaning vital force are important concepts within Yoga. The meditative capability of yoga is often achieved through an individual's dedicated and consistent efforts through the eight-fold path. When the mind reaches meditative state, then one can focus the mind on the sacred object which is a source of joy and peace. Then one will be able to concentrate on the present and remain unaffected by the past and future.

3 Yoga – Definition and Types / Paths

Yoga has different traditional definitions. Some of the definitions commonly used are: “Yoga is the restraint of mental operation (process)” or “Yoga is balance (equanimity).” Yoga means “union” between one’s individual consciousness and the Universal consciousness, in contrast to the common understanding of union between body and mind, or body, mind and spirit.

Although there are many types of yoga, here various Yogis, meaning an adherent of Yoga philosophy, have traditionally classified into the five major Margas (paths). These five major paths are:

- (i) *Jnana Yoga* or Jnana Marga (path of knowledge) which is the Yoga of wisdom and develops the Intellect or will.
- (ii) *Bhakti Yoga* (path of devotion), the Yoga of devotion, opens the heart.
- (iii) *Karma Yoga* (path of self-less action), the path of action of selfless service.
- (iv) *Raja Yoga or Ashtanga yoga* (eight-fold yoga), the royal or psychological which involves the mind. Ashtanga Yoga forms the practical and scientific basis of Vedic (Hindu) philosophy and spirituality. This Yoga process, described in eight steps, is based on Aphorisms (sutras) of yoga by Maharishi Patanjali. Sutras are very short statements with deep insights and they are easy to memorize. Hatha Yoga is a branch of Raja Yoga that prepares the Yogi for the higher stages of Raja Yoga.
- (v) *Mantra, Naada yoga*: This approach uses Mantra referring to spiritual invocation or incantation as well as sacred sounds as the medium to contemplate on the sacred object. The world of sound is also seen as a manifestation of Supreme Being.

Every Yogi, or human being for that matter, possesses and identifies with each of these elements: Intellect, heart, body and mind. Therefore everyone can practice certain techniques from each path, although different emphasis might be given to each path based on one's own interest and capability.

4 Yogashastra– Maharshi Patanjali's Treatise

Maharshi Patanjali introduced a very fundamental and comprehensive treatise on yoga in Sanskrit called "Yoga-shastra" referring to a treatise or scripture on Yoga. Sage Patanjali's dissertation on yoga is a collection of 196 Sutras, which are clear, concise, accurate and unambiguous aphorisms. He defined the essence of yoga in the first sutras as "yogah chitta vritti nirodah," which means "Yoga is restraint of mental operation (process)". That Maharshi Patanjali has encapsulated the quintessence of yoga in just *three* words reveals the depth of his experience and his ability to communicate. In this 'sutra chitta' means mind; 'vritti' means mental operation; 'nirodah' means restraint.

Yogashastra answers some of life's profound questions such as "Who am I, Why am I born, what is the purpose of life and existence, where am I going, How do I deal with my mind, and How can I be happy and peaceful." Yoga provides answers for these questions and more.

According to Maharshi Patanjali, a state of mind that is unaffected from fluctuations is what Yoga is striving for in order to reach ultimate consciousness. To reach this state, Patanjali advocates a highly structured path of practice called astanga yoga i.e., eight fold path. In the words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru, "*The customs and habits, the dress and ornaments, the manners and etiquette, the conceptions of right and wrong and of good and evil, the learning, literature and the various arts like music, the political thoughts, views regarding all actions and the consecratory*

ceremonies, etc., of the Indians (Bharatiyas), are all permeated like the warp and woof by Ashtanga Yoga.”

The 8 Steps based on Patanjali’s aphorisms are Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi.

- (i) *Yama* (self-control) deals with physical and mental disciplines and their related practices. Here self control refers to control of or the ability to exercise restraint on Thought, Speech and Deeds. The basic actions include *Ahimsa* meaning practice of nonviolence, *Satya* being Truthful, *Asteya* referring to non-covetedness, *Bramhacharya* practicing continence, and *Aparigriha*, referring to non-receiving.
- (ii) *Niyama* (discipline) also deals with physical and mental disciplines and related practices. The basic requirements include *Shoucha* practicing cleanliness, *Santosha* being content, *Tapah* practicing austerity, *Swadhyaya* referring to study of Scriptures, and *Ishvarapranidhana* surrendering to Supreme Being as God. Practicing this discipline, one becomes free from ego.
- (iii) *Asana* deals with the practice of postures for achieving stability and firmness of the body, both physically and psychologically.
- (iv) *Pranayama* deals with control and regulation of Prana (vital force). This is done through proper regulation of inhaling, holding the breath and exhaling.
- (v) *Pratyahara* deals with the practice of withdrawing the mind from the senses and the multiplicity of thoughts. This helps directing the mind towards inner-self.
- (vi) *Dharana* deals with the development of the ability of the indrawn mind to focus and concentrate on the sacred object.
- (vii) *Dhyāna* (meditation) continuous contemplation or concentration on the sacred object.
- (viii) *Samādhi* refers to a state of balance and deep spiritual absorption.

5 Yoga-Asana and Mind-body Harmony

The intention of this article is not to consider all different approaches or techniques to reach the ultimate goal of universal consciousness, but illustrate some aspects of Yoga and its benefits for daily use. Many Sages and Swamis referring to a Hindu ascetic or religious teacher have tried to simplify the vast knowledge of Yoga, originally written by Maharshi Patanjali through Sutras (precept), into simpler ways for easy understanding, or to positively use yoga in one’s daily life. For example, Swami Sivananda has divided the knowledge into five principle actions such as *Proper Exercise, Proper Breathing, Proper Relaxation, Proper Diet and Positive Thinking & Meditation* [2]. The Yama and Niyama are important for building the right human relations as described in “Sahatva” (togetherness) in the Shanti mantra “Sahanavavatu.” So, Yama and Niyama are followed before performing Yoga-Asanas.

Yoga-Asanas are designed to develop not only the body but also broaden the mental faculties and spiritual qualities. Yoga regards the body as a vehicle for the

soul to reach ultimate consciousness and hence provide balance in the development of body and mind.

Yoga-Asanas, a term referring to steady pose, which increases body flexibility, is the key to being healthy. Yoga exercises focus on the health, strength and flexibility of the spine. The spinal column is important as it carries the complete nervous system of the body. By maintaining the spine's flexibility and strength through exercise, circulation is increased and the nerves are ensured their supply of nutrients and oxygen. The Asanas also affect the internal organs and the endocrine system (glands and hormones).

Although there are many asanas in scripture, in this article a discussion on the benefits of practicing major postures are provided. The actual steps for practicing these asanas can be found in any book on Yoga-Asanas but is not described here.

6 Benefits of major Asanas

Caution: *Please do not attempt any of the postures without proper learning of Yoga-Asanas from an expert. There may be many variations of these poses, depending on the comfort level for each individual.*

Although there are thousands of asanas in the scriptures and its variants, in this article only few of the well-known asanas with some of the major benefits are listed. It is needless to say that all asanas are to be practiced with patience and perseverance.

(i) *Suryanamaskara or Sun Salutation*



The practice of sun salutation which is comprised of a series of postures helps in maintaining good health and vigor. It invigorates the body and the mind. It helps to reduce abdominal fat and increases the flexibility of the spine and limbs. Since the various steps of sun-salutation require coordination with breathing, it strengthens the breathing capacity. The reduction of fat will help to reduce the effects of hypertension, diabetes etc. It has the potential to penetrate and rejuvenate most of the vital organs of the

human system, while keeping the mind calm and focused.

(ii) *Halasana or Plough*



In the Plough, the body is bent forward and rejuvenates abdominal organs due to contraction. The spine receives an extra supply of blood due to the forward bend, which helps to relieve back pain. Also, this posture relieves stiffness in the shoulders and elbows.

(iii) *Matsyasana or Fish*



This posture like Fish is to lie on the back while arching the chest. This posture removes stiffness from the cervical and lumbar regions as well as the shoulder muscles. The Asana enhances the respiratory systems as the chest is stretched open and the bronchial tubes are widened to promote easier breathing. Regular practice over time has the potential to expand the ribcage thus allowing for deeper breathing. Due to the lifting of the chest and the tucking of the arms underneath the body, postural defects such as rounded shoulders can be corrected. It is advised that this posture immediately follows the posture of shoulder-stand (Sarvangasana).

(iv) *Sarvangasana or Shoulderstand*



This Asana, an inverted pose resting on the shoulders strengthens the entire body, especially concentrating on thyroid and parathyroid glands. It gives many of the benefits of a full headstand. Also, the ligaments of the cervical regions are especially stretched in this posture. .

(v) *Paschimothanasana or Forward bend*



This powerful abdominal exercise helps to ease the spinal compression caused by standing upright. It stimulates kidneys, liver and pancreas and is invaluable exercise for diabetic patients. The hamstring muscles of the back of the knees are strengthened. Its practice contributes greatly toward keeping the back supple, joints mobile, nervous system invigorated, and the internal organs toned.

(vi) *Bhujangasana or Cobra*



This posture is good for alleviating back pain and especially useful for women for toning the ovaries and the uterus. Asana lets you coil your upper body up and back, bringing flexibility to your back. In this posture every vertebra and its ligaments are pulled backwards.

(vii) *Shalabhasana or Locust*



This posture is performed lying face down with lifted legs which provide flexibility to neck and back. In this posture the cervical region and ligaments are used. This pose exerts pressure on the back muscles, shoulder muscles, the biceps and the upper arms. This will enable the stretching of muscles and tendons, thus increasing blood circulation.

(viii) *Dhanurasana or Bow*



This asana is balanced on the abdomen in the shape of a bow and works on all parts of the back simultaneously. The back muscles are well massaged. It reduces fat and energizes digestion. Also it invigorates the appetite and relieves the congestion of blood in the abdominal viscera. This posture combines the effects of Bhujanga-asana (cobra) and Shalabha-asana (locust).

(ix) *Ardha Matsyaendrasana or Spinal twist*



A lateral stretch for the entire spine is achieved in this asana. The posture keeps the spine elastic and massages the abdominal organs. The spinal nerve roots and sympathetic systems are toned. This posture is a good to relieve constipation. This asana helps to maintain sideways mobility in the spine.

(x) *Kakasana or Crow Pose*



This asana is aimed at balancing in a squat position. Besides increasing physical and mental balance, the crow pose develops mental tranquility and strengthens the wrists and forearms.

(xi) *Mayuraasana or Peacock pose*



In this posture, the body is balanced parallel to the ground. This posture provides balance and strengthens wrists and forearms. It is beneficial for stomach disorders. The liver, pancreas, stomach and the kidneys are toned.

(xii) *Pada Hasthasana or Standing forward bend*



In this asana the body is bent forward in a standing position. The standing posture develops strength and flexibility in the legs and hips and brings equilibrium in the body. The Hands-to-Feet Posture stretches the spine and joints, and increases the blood supply to the brain. This posture makes the spine and legs supple and strong.

(xiii) *Trikonasana or Triangle*



This asana resembles a lateral bend in the form of a triangle. The Triangular posture is a lateral stretch for the trunk muscles and spine and makes the hips, legs, and shoulders more flexible. This posture tones the spinal nerves and the abdominal organs.

(xiv) *Padmasana or Lotus pose*



This classic sitting posture is also known as Padmasana (Lotus) in which the erect position of the spine will keep it in a natural curve. Also training the body to sit in this posture for a long period without movement helps the mind to become free from psychological disturbances caused by the physical activities of the body. This posture is greatly revered as a posture for meditation and Pranayama because it enhances concentration.

(xv) *Sirshasana or Headstand*



The headstand, king of asanas, relaxes and invigorates the entire body. As sitting and standing for most of the day causes blood circulation to become sluggish, the heart has to work harder to pump sufficient blood to the upper parts of the body. This headstand posture harmonizes blood circulation. Normally, the heart works against gravity. So, inverting the entire body lessens the strain on the heart, and allows a plentiful supply of oxygen-rich blood to reach the head and brain. It stretches the veins and strengthens the muscles of thighs, legs and feet.

It is recommended after practicing yoga asanas to do Savasana corpse pose to provide complete relaxation. More details in the following section.

7 Pranayama

Prana is the vital energy required for sustaining the dynamic operation and coordination of each organ within a body. The continuous flow of Prana in the *naadis*, or subtle nerves in the body, is important for a disease-free body. *Pranayama* is control and smooth flow of Prana through Yoga exercises. Pranayama or Prana-control can be achieved by the modification of breathing patterns. Pranayama exercise is done through proper regulation of inhaling, holding the breath and exhaling. While pranayama can be practiced alone, it can be integrated with several of the asanas (postures) for improved benefits.

Caution: Pranayama, exercises of breathing, should be properly learnt and practiced from expert teachers through formal learning.

7.1 Proper Breathing

Most people do not use full lung capacity while breathing. Either they hunch their shoulders while breathing or they have tension in their necks and backs. Hence it is good to learn full (Yogic) breathing to benefit from Yoga. Although many of us practice breathing such as Clavicular breathing, or Thoracic breathing, it is better to learn deep abdominal breathing. The deep abdominal breathing is better because it brings air to the lowest and largest part of the lungs. Deep abdominal breathing is slow and deep, and makes proper use of the diaphragm.

7.2 The Full Yogic Breathing

A full Yogic breath combines all three types of breathing mentioned in the previous section, beginning with a deep breath and continuing the inhalation through the intercostal and clavicular areas. For Yogic breathing, breathe in slowly; expand the abdomen, then the ribcage, and finally the upper portion of the lungs. Then, breathe out in the same manner, letting the abdomen cave in as you exhale...

8 Proper Relaxation

After performing any asana or regardless of daily activity the body and mind tend to be overworked. It is important not to forget that rest and relaxation are nature's way of recharging. To regulate and balance the work of the body and mind, it is best to learn to economize the energy produced by our body. This may be done by learning to relax.

The eruption and repression of violent emotions result in disastrous effects not only for the body, but also for the mind. During complete relaxation, there is practically no vital energy or "Prana shakti" being consumed. Generally, three methods are used by yogis: "Physical", "Mental", and "Spiritual" relaxation.

(i) Physical Relaxation



Physical relaxation relaxes all parts of the body and the relaxation posture used is Savasana, or the "Corpse Pose". This is a yogic posture for deep relaxation.

(ii) Mental Relaxation

When experiencing mental tension, it is advisable to take deep breaths, slowly and rhythmically for a few minutes. Soon the mind will become calm.

(iii) Spiritual Relaxation

Yogis know that unless a person can withdraw from the body/mind idea and separate himself from the ego-consciousness, there is no way of

obtaining complete relaxation. The yogi identifies himself with the all pervading, all-powerful, all-peaceful and joyful self, or pure consciousness within.

9 Conclusion:

The practice of Yoga enables any human being to realize one's own multi-dimensional nature, integrating physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual levels of existence. All realized yogis and shastras declare that yoga is indispensable for all those who want to attain the universal consciousness (Paramaatman) in life. Yoga has become a popular subject as a curative and preventive measure for all physical and/or psychological issues. In yoga, body, mind and soul are not seen in isolation. Maharshi Patanjali with his yogic method helps us to eradicate the root-cause of disease, by bringing *Sharirashuddhi* (purification of body), *Manahshuddhi* (purification of mind), *Karmashuddhi* (purification of action), *Chittashuddhi* (purification of mind) together to result in *Atmashuddhi* (purification of soul). Practicing Yoga-Asanas in one's daily life will not only develop a flexible body but also maintain balance between mind and body. Ideally, this puts the spiritual development of an individual on the track towards realization of the ultimate goal of human life: achieving Universal Consciousness.

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