

ĀSANA

Refinement of the Body

आसन

There is a road in the hearts of all of us,
hidden and seldom traveled, which leads to an unknown,
secret place. To sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to
think more deeply and to feel more keenly.

CHIEF LUTHER STANDING BEAR

YOGA IS MUCH MORE THAN performing physical postures. Yet doing these postures (*āsana-s*) purifies and prepares our body for seated meditation. Our physical health affects our heart-mind and vice versa. As we twist, jump, stretch, and invert all parts of our physique, impurities are churned up and released, allowing our life force (*prāṇa*) to flow more easily and improving our overall well-being.

Āsana is the third of the eight limbs of yoga (*aṣṭāṅga*). The word *āsana* means "sitting" or "seat." *Āsana* precedes breath regulation (*prāṇāyāma*) because *āsana* works on the outer, physical layer of our being, while *prāṇāyāma* works with our breath (*prāṇa*), an inner and more subtle layer of our being. The body needs to be strong and pliable to ground the *prāṇa*

flowing through its subtle energy channels. The aim of *āsana* is to reduce any hyperactivity in the nervous system and prepare the body for *prāṇāyāma*. If one cannot sit still comfortably with the spine erect, the *prāṇa* cannot flow unobstructed. On the other hand, it is important to be able to breathe consciously during the practice of *āsana*, so they work hand in hand.

Patañjali does not emphasize *āsana* and devotes only three *sūtra*-s to it, just enough to mention the basic characteristics of its practice. The Yoga Sūtras treats *āsana* as a small but important step along the path of yoga. There are other texts that go into much more detail about *āsana*-s, including what they look like and how to perform them.

When sitting in meditation, we should feel stable and comfortable. Feeling stable means not moving, not teetering, not fidgeting at all. Feeling comfortable implies feeling no pain or anxiety, being relaxed and at ease. These two qualities can be achieved when there is no more exertion and the body is able to sit upright while completely relaxed. Sitting on a chair may be required if the body is not yet flexible enough to sit this way on the floor. Many practitioners feel the need to sit on the floor for meditation, but if discomfort is present, it will defeat the purpose. It is perfectly fine to sit in a chair until our *āsana* practice has prepared us to sit on the floor.

On the other hand, when our attention is focused completely, then we are no longer affected by our surroundings, like heat and cold, pleasure and pain. There are some practices that encourage sitting uncomfortably and in pain, so our heart-mind can work through these distractions, eventually becoming so focused that it is able to ignore them. When we can sit effortlessly still and relaxed regardless of whether or not there are distractions, with our heart-mind focused on the infinite within, then the *prāṇa* is stable and *pratyāhāra* occurs naturally, leaving us undisturbed by sensory stimuli.

Āyurveda is yoga's sister science of health and medicine, and its principles, practices, and goals go hand in hand with those of yoga. If the body is not properly cared for, then the breath and heart-mind will be adversely affected, making it very difficult for us to focus inward and connect with our true nature. Disease is an obstacle to yoga (*antarāyā*) and, therefore, is to be prevented whenever possible. *Āsana* is the exercise aspect of Āyurveda. A poor diet or stressful lifestyle will work against our *āsana* progress. It is important that all aspects of our life be in alignment for us to achieve the maximum benefit.

Āsana can be extended to mean our inner posture, our poise, during interactions with others. We want a balance of open-mindedness with groundedness. Being too rigid with our opinion may indicate an attachment to something and is likely connected to egotism (*asmitā*). Closed-mindedness is an aspect of ignorance (*avidyā*). On the other hand, we may have no opinion about anything and go along with whatever anyone says. Our heart-mind may be weak and lack the strength to take a stand. Apathy, an obstacle to yoga (*antarāyā*), may also be present; we simply do not care about what is being discussed, even if it is very important. Yoga involves independent thinking—forming our opinions based on as much reliable information (*pramāṇa*) as possible. Following others blindly is another form of ignorance (*avidyā*).

The practice of *āsana* purifies the body and clarifies the heart-mind. Our body is a sacred temple designed to make it possible for us to self-reflect and connect with a higher awareness within. When our limbs are supple, our breath is smooth, and no energy is blocked, we can relax and focus our attention inward, cultivating inner beauty and happiness.



THOUGHTS

A relaxed body and focused heart-mind bring stability and ease.

Yoga postures can transform the state of my body
and heart-mind into one that is finer and subtler.

I will balance flexibility with firmness in all aspects of my life.

EXERCISES

If you are not comfortable sitting on the floor for meditation, try sitting in a chair. See if you are able to relax more while still keeping your torso from slouching.

When sitting for meditation on the floor, notice what hurts (like your hips or knees). Find out what specific postures will help you sit without pain. Then give emphasis to those postures in your practice.

The next time you are in a conversation with others, notice which of your opinions may be too rigid or too loose. What can you do to balance those?

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PRĀṆĀYĀMA

Regulation of Breath

प्राणायाम

A healthy mind has an easy breath.

ANONYMOUS

STABILIZING AND REFINING *PRĀṆA*, our life force, is the centerpiece of yoga practice. As the fourth of the eight limbs, *prāṇāyāma* is where we begin to work with our subtle body via the breath. *Prāṇa*, equivalent to *chi* in Chinese, is responsible for all movement in the body and directly influences our physical, mental, and emotional health. When *prāṇa* flows smoothly, our attention can focus and our heart-mind can calm down.

Life itself is defined by the existence of *prāṇa*; the word *prāṇa* means “life force” or “breath.” When a baby is born, everyone waits for its first breath or utterance, an indication that its individual life (apart from the mother) has begun. After a person’s last breath, *prāṇa* leaves the body at the time of death. One is not declared dead until the heart stops, the breath stops, and the pupils of the eyes are dilated and unresponsive. These symptoms indicate there is not enough *prāṇa* in the body to sustain life.