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ASANA IN CLASSICAL YOGA

Asanas or the sacred poise of the body, makes the body a strong container, for retaining spiritual knowledge.

Now-A-Days some persons are found to preach the view that the practice of *yogic* posture (*i.e.* the meditative poses, like Padma, Siddha, etc.) serves no purpose, for those who seek divine knowledge, or for cessation of mental fluctuations, some even go to the length of asserting that the practice of *āsana*, enhances attachment to the body.

According to us these views are held by such persons, as have not practised *āsana* seriously. We firmly assert that; (i) all *āsanas* are not equally useful, or useless to all persons (ii) *āsana* possesses limited power, and as such it produces limited results. It would be wrong to hold by practising only *āsana*, one can acquire divine knowledge or super-normal powers.

Though *āsana* is usually rendered as 'yogic posture or pose', it would be better to render it into 'Sacred poise of the body'—as the expression shows the essential characteristic of *āsana*.

Our first assertion is that the practice of *āsana* is highly helpful to those embodied beings, who find their bodies incapable of acquiring one-pointedness, engrossment and the like, chiefly on account of heaviness of the body and similar other causes. As we are to remain constantly with the bodies, we are required to curb or subjugate bodily obstructions, that distract us from the path of Yoga. This way we are required to render the body fit for Yoga practices. This act of rendering or transforming is done by *āsana*. As by truthfulness we make our speech a means to Yoga, so by practising *āsana* we, render our bodies a means of acquiring and preserving spiritual knowledge.

There is no absurdity in holding that the object of practising *āsana* is to render the body a powerful means to Yoga or a strong container for retaining spiritual knowledge. As all positions and postures of the body are not found to be equally

helpful in performing different acts, and as some postures are found to be highly useful in acquiring proficiency in some acts, so all postures or positions of the body are not equally useful in acquiring one-pointedness and the like, or in retaining tranquility of mind. As human beings find their heart and the like (and not the knee, leg, etc.) to be the most suitable places (*deśa*) for meditating deities, so some particular position of the body (*i.e.* particular arrangements of limbs) are found to be highly helpful in practising *yogic* exercises.

It should be borne in mind that we take *āsana* (*i.e.* the meditative postures like Padma, etc.) as 'auxiliary to Yoga' (*yogāṅga*). If the meditative postures are practised-dissociating them from Yoga—then they will not serve the specific purpose of practising *yogaṅgas*, though they will produce their own results in some of the particular aspects of the body.

We lay stress on the distinction between the meditative postures, and the Hāṭhayogic postures. The meditative postures are to be practised invariably with the help of effortlessness or restfulness (*prayatnasaithilya*) and engrossment on the infinite (*anantasamāpatti*) as has been clearly stated in the Yoga Sūtra (2.47). If the meditative postures become bereft of these two factors, then the postures cease to become *yogāṅga* and these defective or artificial meditative postures fail to render the body fit for performing *yogic* exercises. It is our well-considered opinion that the physical body must attain a particular kind of fitness so that it can be a firm seat of the mind in which spiritual knowledge dawns. A person with a body without this fitness, will find it difficult to enjoy spiritual knowledge, though this knowledge is not a product of the body. *Asanas* have direct bearing on the body, as *prāṇāyāma* has direct bearing on the vital forces.

Hāṭhayogic *āsanas* may also be practised with the help of the two aforesaid factors and if they are practised in this way then they can be treated as meditative postures. (Hāṭhayogic postures may be called secondary meditative postures). This is why we sometimes find mention of non-meditative postures along with the meditative postures in one and the same passage in Yoga texts. The meditative postures like Padma, Siddha etc. are highly praised in Hāṭhā-

yoga works. The reason for this praise is nothing but their power to render the body spiritually strong. Strength of various kinds is necessary in order to acquire divine wisdom. A kind of strength is produced by āsana also.

The results of practising āsana deserve to be verified. We request all critics to verify the results stated in authoritative texts, and to cease from making any diatribe against the practising of āsana before trying to verify the results. Please verify whether or not the greater part of a text studied, is easily remembered by a person if he studies sitting in the Padma āsana. Please observe whether or not a person can read for a longer time if he reads sitting in a meditative posture. There is nothing 'unscientific' in the teachings of *yogins* on the mechanism of living organism *i.e.* the body. Anybody can bear witness to this fact (*i*) by achieving the results produced by fixity (*dhāraṇa*, one of the auxiliaries of Yoga) applied to the *cakras* situated on the different regions of the body (*ii*) by strengthening the nervous system by means of practising āsanās as prescribed in Haṭhayoga.

Yogic texts repeatedly speak of the eradication of various diseases as the result of practising meditative and non-meditative āsanās. Here we are concerned with the meditative postures, and we can boldly assert that *dvandvasahana* *i.e.* endurance of the pair of opposites or *dvandva anabhighāta* *i.e.* non-affection by the pairs of opposites, is the chief result of practising meditative postures. (A grosser kind of endurance and non-affection is acquired by practising non-meditative postures also). Practitioners of āsana can observe that a kind of anaesthesia is produced as a result of practising āsana and it gives rise to insensitiveness to the feeling of heat and cold. A long practise does make a person insensitive to hunger and thirst, and also to other forms of pain. It is needless to say that these results are highly useful for practising meditation, etc.

Philosophically speaking, the practice of āsana has a two-fold operation. At first it eradicates those blemishes or faults which render the body in such a way as to make it spiritually strong. So long as a person possesses a body, bodily fitness (in the spiritual sense) is absolutely necessary,

to run on the path of Yoga. Spiritual fitness is not to be confounded with the strength of muscles.

Since the practice of āsana is meant to render the body spiritually fit, it is quite logical to hold that the subtlety and grossness varies with the body. Not only human beings, but all species of beings have their suitable āsanās in order to render their bodies spiritually fit. We do not want to discuss this point elaborately here.

Yoga āsanās are based on some subtle principles. Yogins of olden times conceived the āsanās (mentioned in their works) in accordance with these principles after carefully observing, the mechanism, nature and quality of living organism. As these organisms (*i.e.* the bodies) are changeable things, on account of their being products of the three guṇas, the external forms of the āsanās are liable to be changed in accordance with bodily changes, that arise according to the change of time, place etc.

I may draw here the attention of our readers, to a assertion of sages that *kāma*, *krodha*, *bhaya*, *nidrā* and *svāsa* are the faults residing in the body (Śanti-p. 301. 54-55). This undoubtedly shows that the bodily conditions play a greater role in the rise of lust or greed, wrath, fear, drowsiness or sleep and breathing. It can be demonstrated that by a regular and proper practice of āsana one can curb or check the powerful attacks of *kāma*, etc. to a considerable degree. If the practice of āsana is combined with the practice of *prāṇāyāma*, etc. then the power of curbing or checking, becomes greatly developed—a fact which can be proved by experiment.

From the foregoing discussion it can be concluded that the practice of āsana enables a person to ponder peacefully and deeply, over the subtle aspects of spiritual doctrines, for he remains without being disturbed by bodily weakness, or external conditions. Thus the practice of āsana becomes a helping factor for *manana* (ratiocination). Gradually the practice of āsana (accompanied by the practice of *prāṇāyāma* and *pratyāhāra*) render the body a worthy seat of spiritual experience.