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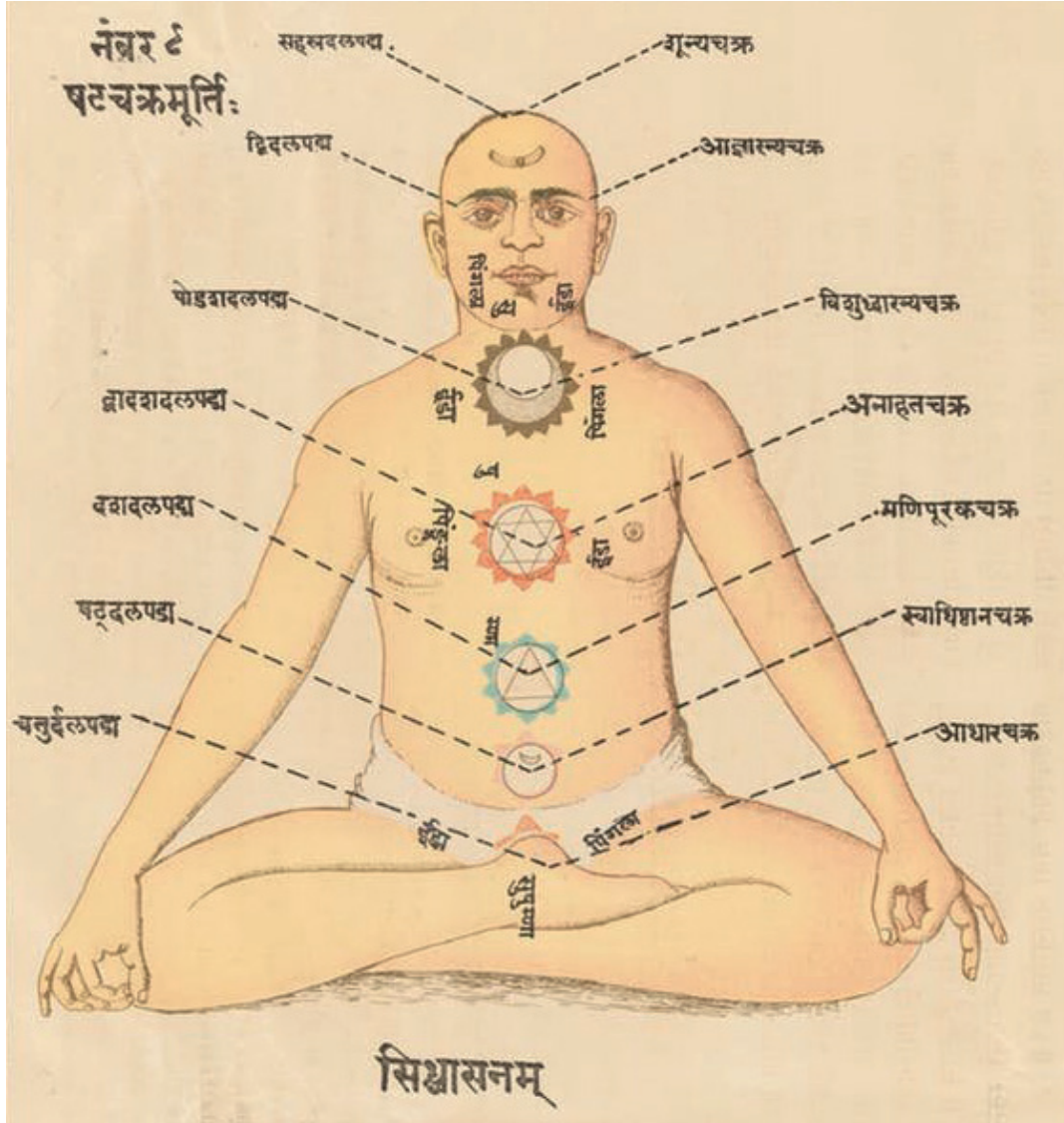
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shantarām

HATHA YOGA by NICOLAS AMBROSETTI

ASANAS

Sthira Sukham Asanam



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HATHA YOGA by NICOLAS AMBROSETTI

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of the Sanskrit word asana is '**a steady and comfortable posture**'. It is often believed that asanas are physical exercises. And of course this is true; they do have a profound influence on the body, but this does not convey their full significance. Each person is made up of three aspects: body, mind and consciousness, which merge together to constitute our whole being. Asanas aim at influencing all these three aspects and moulding and yoking them into one harmonious whole.

As such one should try to think of asanas not as physical poses but as states of being. Correct performance of asanas requires participation of one's whole being, with awareness of oneself in relation to the physical position and movement, the breath, relaxation of the muscles and so forth. If asanas were only physical exercises then it would be quite acceptable to think about work, breakfast or whatever while performing them. But this is not the case. The practice of asanas requires active involvement of one's entire being as fully as possible.

Health of mind and body

It is impossible to work actively in life with an unhealthy mind and body. This applies to work and play as well as to spiritual aspiration. The fundamental requirement is the healthiest possible mind and body. The ancient yogis realised this thousands of years ago and for this reason developed the system of asanas. The asanas were tested thoroughly by the personal experience of these pioneers. Asanas evolved slowly through practice, and because of this, they have withstood the test of time. The body and mind of man thousands of years ago was little different to the mind and body of man today. As such asanas are as useful in the present age as they were to the ancient originators.

Many modern systems, in all fields of activity, are often based only on a few years experience; they rarely last for very long periods and are usually modified because of inadequacies in their makeup. Asanas, on the other hand, are a well-tested system for attaining mental and physical health.

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HATHA YOGA by NICOLAS AMBROSETTI

INTRODUCTION part 2

The prime aim of asanas is to help us tread the path to higher consciousness so we can begin to understand and know our relationship with existence. We cannot even consider attaining higher awareness if we are ill with disease, aches and pains or mental depression. Therefore, the initial purpose of practising asanas is to eliminate these afflictions and disturbances. Asanas loosen up the joints of the body, stretch and tone the muscles and remove poisons which tend to accumulate in various parts of the body.

They also harmonize the nervous system and with a gentle massage they improve the functioning of all the internal organs such as the heart, lungs, abdominal organs, endocrinal glands, blood vessels and so on. This slowly but surely leads to the best possible physical health.

The mind and body are not really separate entities; they are two parts of the human organism. The mind is the controller or the computer and the body is the machinery. They are closely inter-related. Improvement in the general health of the body automatically helps to bring about positive mental changes. We will point out that mental problems or tension, as well as an unhealthy body, are the prime cause of most diseases which afflict mankind. The body has remarkable autotherapeutic powers.

It naturally has great strength to resist the onset of disease by means of antibodies which counteract bacteriological growth. A body that is unhealthy and a mind that is tense tend to whittle away these powers making the body more vulnerable to illness. Asanas help the body to resist disease by bringing the mind and body into the best possible condition. A body saturated with poisons and toxins is a breeding ground for germs and is conducive to attack by disease. Asanas help to purify the body and thereby prevent diseases occurring.

Some ailments are caused by malfunctioning of internal organs - blood pressure, heart attack, diabetes and so on. Asanas prevent this happening by bringing all the relevant organs into good working condition, improving nerve connections and also by reducing chronic mental stress, the latter being the root cause of most of the problems in the first place.

Asanas not only prevent disease; they also help to eliminate many types of diseases for the same reasons as given in the previous paragraph.

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FIVE REASONS

The influence of asanas on one's mental outlook

The stepping stone to higher awareness and a happy life is an optimistic attitude. Asanas help to change and reorientate a person's mental outlook. How? There are various answers, which we will discuss in turn.

Firstly, asanas greatly influence the functioning of the endocrine system. This system exerts vast control over our lives. It carries out an uncountable number of indispensable functions within the body and it influences our physical appearance, emotional outlook and in fact much of our behaviour and attitude towards life.

A person who has a healthy endocrine system is generally optimistic, clear in thought and positive in action. A person with a system that is out of balance will tend to be unhealthy, pessimistic and either excessively active or inactive physically and mentally. Endocrinology is a very interesting science encompassing reproduction, digestion, emotional reactions and in fact all aspects of life.

The endocrine system consists of various glands located throughout the body, which secrete special substances called hormones. Each of these hormones has a specific function to perform in the body. They act as triggers which prompt the various organs into higher or lower levels of activity as required, or in some cases such as the women's menstrual cycle they initiate and terminate various processes. These hormones also interact with and modify the activities of each other.

For optimum health the entire system must be in balance and perfectly coordinated, each gland secreting the required hormone in the right quantity at the right time. If there is disharmony in the endocrinal system then there will be a malfunction in one or more of the bodily processes and possibly in the emotional makeup of one's personality.

There is such an intricate interrelationship between the various glands that one malfunctioning gland can cause disruption of the whole system. Asanas are designed to rectify overactivity or sluggishness of individual glands as well as harmonize the control centre of the system in the brain. This is why even simple asanas can sometimes bring about astonishingly quick benefits.

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FIVE REASONS ²

Endocrinal disorders are not usually organic - they are generally functional. In other words, the individual glands are capable of working correctly but don't, perhaps because of stress or misuse of the body. This can be compared to a car. If the petrol mixture is too rich, or the air and petrol intake pipes are blocked, the car will cease to work or will not run smoothly. It still has the capacity to work properly and will do so when the necessary adjustments are made. With the endocrine system the functional breakdown may be due to ineffective nerve impulses or insufficient supply of oxygenated blood, perhaps due to incorrect breathing and so on. Asanas automatically and gently rectify this condition, bringing the system into proper working order again. This system has a major influence on our emotional makeup, which is intimately connected with our mental processes. As such, improvement of this system alone through the practice of asanas can result in profound changes in our attitude to life.

Secondly, asanas bring about harmony in the various other bodily systems. These systems are rhythmical in nature and include the blood, nervous, respiratory, digestive as well as the endocrine system which we have already mentioned. These systems are all intimately related to each other. When the proper working relationship between these bodily processes is lost there is a resultant loss of health and body efficiency. This has repercussions on our emotional and mental well-being. Asanas coordinate these various systems bringing rhythm and balance into the body-mind complex.

Thirdly, asanas have subtle influences on the body, which perhaps a physiologist would tend to deny. Surrounding and permeating the whole body is an energy field which is normally imperceptible to our senses. In yoga this is called the pranamaya kosha (energy sheath) and is commonly known as the etheric body by people who have developed their psychic potential. However, this concept should not be taken lightly, for scientists in Russia have actually detected and photographed this energy body. There it is called bioplasma or bioluminescence. This energy travels in and around the body in specific pathways, which in yoga are known as nadis. These pathways easily become blocked and prana becomes congested in certain areas, which can lead to physical and mental disorders. Asanas encourage free flow of prana and thereby facilitate good health. Further, this energy body is intimately connected to the mind. As such the uninhibited flow of prana brought about by asanas, leads to mental equilibrium and calmness.

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FIVE REASONS ³

Fourthly, asanas automatically bring about a change in breathing. Rapid and irregular breathing signifies tension in mind and body, whereas slow, deep and rhythmical breathing indicates calmness and well-being. Asanas bring about mental and emotional equanimity by slowing down the breathing and deepening the inhalation and exhalation.

Fifthly, awareness is an essential feature of the practice of asanas. While performing asanas one should be fully aware of what is being done and not allow the mind to wander here and there. Without awareness asanas are not really asanas, no matter how well they may be physically performed. This awareness of breath movement while doing asanas draws our attention away from entanglement with superficial worries and problems, at least for a period of time. This includes relaxation of one's personality. It may be temporary, but it assists in bringing about permanent changes in a person's mental and emotional makeup.

Our emotional and mental attitudes and feelings are noticeably reflected in our physical poise and expressions. If we are angry we tend to hunch our shoulders; if we are tense and worried we frown; if we feel nervous we shake and breathe quickly and so on. Conversely, if we feel happy we simultaneously feel light and more flexible in the body. These are mental and emotional attitudes reflected in the body. This is also a two way process - the body can induce corresponding changes in the mind. Asanas make the body relaxed, strong, light, supple, free of aches and pains and this in turn brings about emotional and mental calmness and confidence.

As already mentioned, asanas are very useful in eliminating diseases. This alone is conducive to mental and emotional stability. Let us take an example: constipation. This ailment is generally accepted by medical science to be caused initially by mental tension, though there are other factors such as lack of exercise and unsuitable food habits. When a person suffers from constipation there is also a feeling of heaviness, not only in the body, but also in the mind. One's thinking processes become dulled and pessimistic. Asanas help to remove constipation so that one simultaneously becomes more light-hearted and carefree. By removing or easing physical ailments, asanas also bring about a corresponding relaxation and freedom of one's personality.

All the previous factors that we have listed interrelate with each other. **The overall result is a notable and positive change in one's subconscious and conscious thinking processes.**

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AWARENESS

It is clear that asanas exercise a profound influence on the mind-body complex. Regular practice of asanas helps to make one master of the mind and body, and not the slave. The beautiful, strong body aimed at in various body building systems, without a correspondingly developed mind, is as insufficient as a highly intellectual mind contained within a weak, sickly body.

The ideal is to have both a strong, healthy mind and body. This is the aim of asanas as well as yoga in general. The practice of asanas should not be divorced from the other aspects of yoga. It is an integral part of yoga techniques with the purpose of leading each of us to higher awareness. This was why the ancient originators of yoga developed asanas and other yogic practices, though this is rarely considered today. The ancient yogis aimed at transcending the normal limitations of the mind and body. Their aim was to transcend individuality and to achieve self-realization. In this context, asanas were not intended specifically to develop the mind and body.

This was a means to an end. Their aim was to make the body so perfect and the subconscious mind so calm and trouble free that these aspects of individual existence could be forgotten.

Consciousness could be disentangled from the troubles of the mind and body. When the aches and pains and ailments of the body are removed and one is emotionally and mentally relaxed, then one automatically ceases to be aware of the physical body and the superficialities of the mind.

In this way the fetters of individuality can be released and one's true nature - pure, infinite, all pervasive consciousness - can be realized.

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ASANAS

RULES & PREPARATION

The place of practice should be clean, quiet and well ventilated. There should be no bad smells, dampness or cold draughts. The area should be uncluttered with furniture and other objects. Try to use the same place every day to build up an atmosphere of peace.

Take a wash or bath and go to the toilet before the practice if possible. Wait for at least three hours after food before doing asanas. You can take food after your asana program if you wish. If possible do neti before commencing your practice. Either jala neti or sutra neti is suitable.

The best time to practise is before breakfast, early in the morning, though other times are also suitable. In fact you will find that asanas are much easier to do in the afternoon and evening, because the body is always stiffer in the morning. But nevertheless, the morning is the best time for there are peaceful vibrations in the air, and you gain greater benefits and a good preparation for the coming day. Also in the early morning there are fewer pressing distractions to drag you away from your practice, either physically or mentally.

The duration of practice should be regulated according to your available time, though the longer the better. Don't set your aims too high in the beginning; only do as much practice as you can easily manage every day without fail. Fifteen minutes practice every day is better than one hour's practice on one day, none for three days and then again one hour's practice. Many people set themselves an unrealistic program which they do for the first few days, and then the enthusiasm slowly fades and eventually they don't practise at all. So be realistic in choosing the duration of your program, and once you have set it, stick to it regularly.

The program of asanas should be carefully chosen. The order of practising different asanas is very important to gain maximum benefits. Certain asanas supplement each other, whereas others detract from each other. Therefore it is important to choose a systematic program. This will be discussed as the asanas are introduced.

If you feel physically or mentally tired before or during the program perform relaxation asanas such as shavasana and naukasana.

ASANAS

RULES & PREPARATION ²

Don't use excessive force to attain the final positions of the asanas. Your muscles should be slowly encouraged to stretch over a period of time - not stretched and severely strained in one day. You are trying to develop mental control over the muscles and to do this one should try to will the muscles to relax and then they will automatically stretch.

Clothing should be as light as possible under climatic conditions, so that free movement is not impeded.

Breathing should be through the nose, not through the mouth. It should be as deep and rhythmic as possible.

A blanket or rug should be placed on the floor at the place of practice. Don't use a spongy mattress and don't practise on the bare floor.

Close your eyes as much as possible throughout the practice. This will help to intensify your awareness.

The less physical effort that is required the better. The aim is to perform asanas with as little tension or muscular effort as possible. Often we see practitioners grating their teeth while performing asanas, in the execution of the movement to and from the final pose and while in the final position one should check that the maximum number of muscles are relaxed. This applies particularly to beginners, for eventually as you gain control over the muscles this relaxation will occur naturally. Don't hurry under any circumstances. If you lack time to complete your daily program, leave out a few asanas and do the others at a normal slow, relaxed pace. Remember that although you should be relaxed you should not sleep or feel drowsy. You should be as wide awake as possible to gain maximum benefits. If you are sleepy, take a wash or a bath, preferably a cold one and then continue your practice. Don't underestimate the importance of the movements to and from the final poses. They should be done slowly, smoothly, with control and in synchronization with the breath.

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ASANAS

RULES & PREPARATION ³

If you feel mentally or physically tired after the program of asanas, it is a sure sign that you are doing something wrong - perhaps trying too hard or tensing the muscles too much, or tending to concentrate too hard. If you can't see the fault seek expert guidance. You should feel calmness and strength in both mind and body at the end of your practice, far more than when you started.

Don't try to stretch your muscles further than is comfortable. With persistent and regular practice the muscles will elongate, whether you are at present as stiff as a board or as supple as a piece of rubber. The mental attitude is very important in this respect. If you autosuggest to yourself that you want the muscles to stretch, then the mind will automatically take steps to prepare the body to attain what you want. Remember, it is the mind that is the controller.

There are no specific limitations on the practice of asanas with regard to age or sex. However, people who have specific illnesses should not do certain asanas. Full information on this will be given with the description of each asana. For example, a person who has high blood pressure should definitely not attempt inverted asanas, or people with a slipped disc should not try forward bending asanas. These are more obvious examples; there are many such contra-indications which will be fully discussed.

Don't practise asanas if you are ill with a cold or diarrhoea etc. At these times the body is directing its energy to specific areas to fight the illness; let it perform its duties unimpeded. Proceed from the simpler asanas to the more difficult ones. That is why it is necessary to follow the order outlined in this book as it progressively leads from the simpler to the more advanced techniques.

Various people who have strained themselves by prematurely attempting asanas that were too difficult for them.

Asanas are not competitive. If you perform your asanas in a group don't compare yourself with others. We all have differently shaped bodies and some people are able to stretch easier than others. But this is not indicative of how well a person is performing an asana, for one person may physically perform an asana perfectly, yet his awareness is jumping from here to there; while another person may not physically perform the asana very well but his awareness may be on the movements and the breath. In this case the latter is performing the asana much better than the former.

ASANAS

RULES & PREPARATION ⁴

The importance of relaxing the muscles

In most systems of physical culture, gymnastics, etc., the muscles are brought into play during contraction and strengthened. During most asanas the emphasis is on stretching the muscles. The muscles cannot stretch themselves because their mode of action is through contraction. In asanas the muscles are stretched by assuming various body positions which will automatically apply an elongation to particular muscles. A muscle can be slowly and gradually stretched by practice, so that it can eventually extend well beyond its normal limitations. This elongation squeezes out stagnant blood and allows it to be replaced by pure oxygenated blood when the muscle resumes its normal shape. To stretch the muscles it is important that they are fully relaxed. If your muscles are tense they will automatically resist any attempt made to stretch them. This relaxation of the muscles can be developed with practice as you systematically gain control over them.

Slow and controlled movements and coordination with breath

These are necessary to induce calmness in the body and mind. Quick and sudden movements use up excessive energy, whereas the object of asanas is to conserve energy. For this reason they are done slowly. Asanas also aim at slowing down the breathing rate to improve the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the lungs as well as to induce mental tranquillity. Muscular control is an essential feature and aim of asanas and is attained by slow movements, not by sudden jerks. The muscles are to be stretched and this can only be done if they are relaxed; fast movements imply excessive muscular tension. During slow movements it is possible to relax the maximum number of muscles not needed for the movement.

Maintenance of final static poses

The final position is the most important part of the asana practice. During this time specific parts of the body are influenced. The body is held in such a way that certain muscles are stretched to the limit of present flexibility and certain organs are given the best possible squeeze or massage and extra blood is directed to or removed from particular regions. This period of immobility is the time when profound and beneficial changes are occurring in the body. With some asanas it is also a time when deep states of concentration can be reached if the final position is held for extended periods of time. Correct, relaxed respiration is essential in the final static position in order to accentuate the influence of the asana on the body by increasing the massage of the internal organs and by stimulating the exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide through the blood.

ASANAS

RULES & PREPARATION ⁵

Awareness

The importance is avoiding mental tension caused by forced concentration. You should be aware of your mental patterns and extraneous thoughts that occur while practising asanas, but at the same time you should try to be aware of the asana being performed. All other thoughts - a cup of tea, worries about business or whatever - will automatically evaporate. The result will be calmness and peace of mind. What facet of the practice should one be aware of during the performance of an asana? However, the following is a rough guide to the possibilities.

While learning the asana your attention should be on correct performance. You can also be aware of relaxing as many muscles as possible to make the asana easier to perform and more effective. You can be aware of the physical movement, or of the breath while assuming the final pose. In the final position you can be aware of your breath, mantra or the parts of the body that the asana particularly influences.

Relaxation after completion of asanas

This is nearly as important as the asana itself. When one completely relaxes, the organs and muscles return to their normal shape. As such they are flooded with an influx of purified blood to replace the blood that has been squeezed out in performance of the asana. During this resting state the circulatory and respiratory systems also return to normal. This is necessary before one starts the next asana. During this practice of relaxation one should try to relax the body and mind completely maintaining awareness of the body and the breath.

WORDS ON ASANAS

Alignment Fundamentals

The human body has an optimal alignment. When the body is moving closely toward or in optimal alignment there is increased freedom of movement in the joints and more available energy in the body, since the body is not fighting itself and can thus move freely. Pain is also greatly reduced or eliminated when the bones and tissues of the body are in a cooperative relationship.

The ability to perform asana may vary greatly, depending on factors such as bone structure, previous injuries, age, energy level, and ardency of the student. Approaching asana practice as a discipline of mindfulness and non-violence (especially to the practitioner) is a fundamental starting point to a pain-free practice.

Methodology

When performing the grounded stretching we call “asana,” any shape the body can take has the potential to beneficially stretch and strengthen, or cause injury. If we do nothing, just sit on the couch, for instance, there is almost no chance of immediate trauma to the body. There is also a very high chance of eventual ill health due to atrophy of the tissues of the body, and corresponding contraction of the mind and emotional body. Health lies somewhere between doing nothing, and doing too much. When the body is moved with skill and harmony, the intensity of an exercise can be increased safely and the benefits increase as well. An exercise done without awareness has a higher potential for injury and less potential benefit, because we get better at what we practice.

The following sequence of actions is a synthesis, drawn from the work of yoga masters, western physical therapy, watching animals, and personal practice. These techniques belong to no one, they are part of our cultural and intellectual commons. How can you tell if a physical therapy technique is working? It feels good. That recognition is innate, as is the desire to stretch and to rest, and that knowledge is intrinsic in all beings. [Opposites of sedentary and over-active]

Samasthiti [pronounced, sama stee tee hee]

Samasthiti is a Sanskrit word meaning, “to spread the light of awareness throughout the body.” Samasthiti is the state of awareness within the initial pose of standing ready at the front of your mat, and in any pose, demonstration a stance which enables luminous, compassionate concentration. The emotional and intellectual result of this action is a receptivity, physically a lack of outer armoring yet a firm foundation through the parts of the body that touch the earth.

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ASANAS

RULES & PREPARATION ⁶

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WORDS ON ASANAS

Compression and Tension

There are two physical forces that limit range of motion in the body; these limiting forces include tension in the tissues of the body (muscle and connective tissue) and compression. Tension is easy to recognize; it is the “stretching” aspect of hatha yoga. Compression, on the other hand, occurs where two bones meet.

An easy example is your elbow joint. If you extend it fully, the ends of the bones meet and no matter how supple you are, your range of motion in that joint will not increase. By applying appropriate force to a bone, its density will increase, so some compression is good if the aim is to stimulate bone density. Trying to force any joint beyond where it is compressed to achieve an exterior body shape can result in injury and pain.

Everyone’s bones are different in length, shape, and density. Bones can have twists within the shaft that make, in the case of the thigh bone, one foot turn in or out more than the other, while the femur (thighbone) head is still well aligned. The eventual limitation to the depth of any yoga pose will be the shape and size of the bones. Bones can increase or decrease in density, adapting to the stress put upon them, but adult bones do not change size or shape as far as we know.

THE WINDGATES

1. Shoulders

The shoulder girdle includes the clavicle, scapulae, and humerus bones as well as many muscles within and around it. It is easiest to view as a functional unit. The design of the shoulder girdle allows us great range of motion at the expense of some stability, compared with the hip joint for instance.

The only place of bony connection is at the sterno-clavicular joint, located on the front of the body. If you could unbutton this joint you would almost be able to take your shoulders off like a cloak. The most advantageous placement for the shoulders is on the back of the body. When on the back of the body:

- the shoulder blades will be smooth on the back, without significant “winging”;
- the collarbones will be almost invisible on the front of the body; and
- the arms will hang from the shoulders with palms turned slightly forward.

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WORDS ON ASANAS

2. Hips/Low Back

The hips as a functional unit include the pelvic bones, thigh bones and lowest part of the spine, which is sandwiched between the pelvic bones. This area bears the weight of the upper body and transfers it down through the legs, much like an arched stone bridge bears weight from above. The range of motion in the hip socket is limited by the depth and width of the hip socket, the shape and angle of the thigh bone, and possible tissue tension. The most advantageous position for the hips and low back is to stand tall with feet parallel and shoulders on the back plane of the body. This reinforces the natural curves of the spine and helps to ground the lower body.

The most common misalignment in the hips and low back is a lack of curvature at the base of the spine. This flatness creates pressure on the nerves between the vertebrae and decreases range of motion. This flatness is also related to external rotation of the thigh bones and weighting the outer edges of the feet, which in turn flattens the low back even more. Conversely, too much inward curvature, and not enough elongation of the spine, can also create pain due to pressure on the nerves between the vertebrae. An excessively curved low back is related to inward rotation of the femur bones and excessive weight on the inner edges of the feet, rotating the knees inward.

ASANAS CATEGORIES

Postures are classified dependent on their function:

- Standing postures
- Backbends
- Forward bends
- Twists
- Inversions
- Hip-openers
- Restoratives
- Arm balances

STANDING POSTURES

These postures are essential for developing body awareness, muscular strength (especially in the legs) and balance. The entire body is affected strongly by the force of gravity and therefore has to work strenuously. Circulation is encouraged as well as a balanced flow of prana. To find the proper stance width (the distance between your feet), it is helpful to start in a lunge, using that posture's optimal placement of feet as a template to build the standing posture.

BACKBENDS

Backbends open the front of the body. Gravity and habitual closure of the front body due to posture can round the back and close off the front body, both physically, emotionally, and causally (the realm of thought). Backbending invigorates the nervous system and can help to release held emotions. As these postures enliven the nervous system, time of day should be considered for intense backbend practice as they can create insomnia if practiced too late in the evening.

FORWARD BENDS

These postures stretch the back of the body, closing the front where our organs of perception are oriented. The effects are generally more introverted, soothing, and calming to the nervous system. In order for a forward bend to have a beneficial effect, the lower back should be slightly concave and the spine extended, tipping the pelvis forward, before folding the torso forward. It may be necessary to have students sit on a block or blanket to achieve this. If standing, keep legs firm and simply fold partway, with hands supported on legs.

TWISTS

Twists encourage the internal organs to detoxify and are both somewhat invigorating and balancing to the nervous system. To be of most benefit, one part of the twist must stay stable while the other part moves, articulating the vertebrae in the spinal column. The most mobile part of the spine, the neck, will often unconsciously move before the less mobile parts of the spine. Move the torso, both left and right sides equally, into a twist and allow the chest to initiate the depth of the posture. Keep a firm foundation throughout the twist.

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ASANAS CATEGORIES

INVERSIONS

Being upside down literally changes your point of view. Inversions encourage circulation by allowing gravity to reverse the flow of blood. If a student has high blood pressure, inversions such as headstand should be approached cautiously. There is generally some fear connected to being upside down since it is disorienting initially.

HIP OPENERS:

Hip openers encourage root chakra function and can release lower back pain and misalignment in the legs. Because of our preference for sitting in chairs, the muscles and connective tissue of the hips tighten over time and limit range of motion. This coupled with weak abdominal muscles again, the back support of the chair does not encourage engagement of the abdominal area] creates a situation where it becomes difficult for many adults even to sit comfortably on the ground. In order for the front and back of the hips to open, a balance of strengthening and flexibility is key. Standing postures such as Virabhadrasana 1 and 2 as well as Parsvakonasana provide an accessible way to begin to open the hips. New or very tight students may find traditional seated hip openers such as Rajakapotasana extremely challenging and difficult to approximate. Bone structure in the pelvic area (femur heads, length of greater trochanter and shape of the acetabulum) can vary greatly from student to student also, allowing some great freedom of movement and others restriction.

RESTORATIVES

These postures are by nature designed to relax and restore energy. Savasana is the ultimate restorative posture, in which the challenge is allowing true relaxation—a release of muscular tension and of controlled breath while remaining conscious. The body has an innate ability to heal itself. Restorative postures allow a greater flow of prana in the areas targeted. Because of the total relaxation needed, restorative postures should be primarily supine (on the back) and possibly supported by props.

ARM BALANCES

Requiring courage, strength, and stamina, arm balances are perhaps the most exhilarating class of postures. Because of their intensity, they can often be attempted by “muscling” into them. A key point to remember is that the entire body is active in an arm balance, providing stability and distributing the work throughout the body, not just the arms.

SUN SALUTATION

SURYA NAMASKAR

Surya Namaskar or Sun Salutation, is a warm up routine based on a sequence of linked asanas. The nomenclature refers to the symbolism of Sun as the soul and the source of all life. It is relatively a modern practice that developed in the 20th century. Sūrya Namaskāra may also refer to other styles of «Sun Salutations». A yogi may develop a personalized yoga warm up routine as surya-namaskar to precede his or her asana practice.

In many cultures, light has long been a symbol of consciousness and self-illumination. «Opposition between light and darkness has informed the spiritual world of all peoples and molded it into shape.» Our primary source of light is, of course, the sun. When we look at our closest star, we may see nothing more than a big yellow ball. But for thousands of years, the Hindus have revered the sun, which they call Surya, as both the physical and spiritual heart of our world and the creator of all life itself. That's why one of Surya's many other appellations is Savitri [the Vivifier], who, according to the Rig Veda, «begets and feeds mankind in various manners» [III.55.19]. For the Hindus, the sun is the «eye of the world» [loka chakshus], seeing and uniting all selves in itself, an image of and a pathway to the divine.

One of the means of honoring the sun is through the dynamic asana sequence Surya Namaskar. The Sanskrit word namaskar stems from namas, which means «to bow to» or «to adore.» Each Sun Salutation begins and ends with the joined-hands mudra touched to the heart. This placement is no accident; only the heart can know the truth. The ancient yogis taught that each of us replicates the world at large, embodying «rivers, seas, mountains, fields...stars and planets...the sun and moon» [Shiva Samhita, II.1-3]. The outer sun, they asserted, is in reality a token of our own «inner sun,» which corresponds to our subtle, or spiritual, heart. Here is the seat of consciousness and higher wisdom [jnana] and, in some traditions, the domicile of the embodied self [jivatman].

It might seem strange to us that the yogis place the seat of wisdom in the heart, which we typically associate with our emotions, and not the brain. But in yoga, the brain is actually symbolized by the moon, which reflects the sun's light but generates none of its own. This kind of knowledge is worthwhile for dealing with mundane affairs, and is even necessary to a certain extent for the lower stages of spiritual practice. But in the end, the brain is inherently limited in what it can know and is prone to what Patanjali calls misconception [viparyaya] or false knowledge of the self.

History and Practice of Surya Namaskar

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HATHA YOGA by NICOLAS AMBROSETTI

SUN SALUTATION

SURYA NAMSKAR

There's some disagreement among authorities over the origins of Sun Salutation. Traditionalists contend that the sequence is at least 2,500 years old (perhaps even several hundred years older), that it originated during Vedic times as a ritual prostration to the dawn, replete with mantras, offerings of flowers and rice, and libations of water. Skeptics of this dating maintain that Sun Salutation was invented by the raja of Aundh (a former state in India, now part of Maharashtra state) in the early 20th century, then disseminated to the West in the 1920s or 1930s.

However old Sun Salutation is, and whatever it may originally have looked like, many variations have evolved over the years. Janita Stenhouse, in *Sun Yoga: The Book of Surya Namaskar*, illustrates two dozen or so adaptations (though several are quite similar).

The eight basic postures, in order of performance, are:

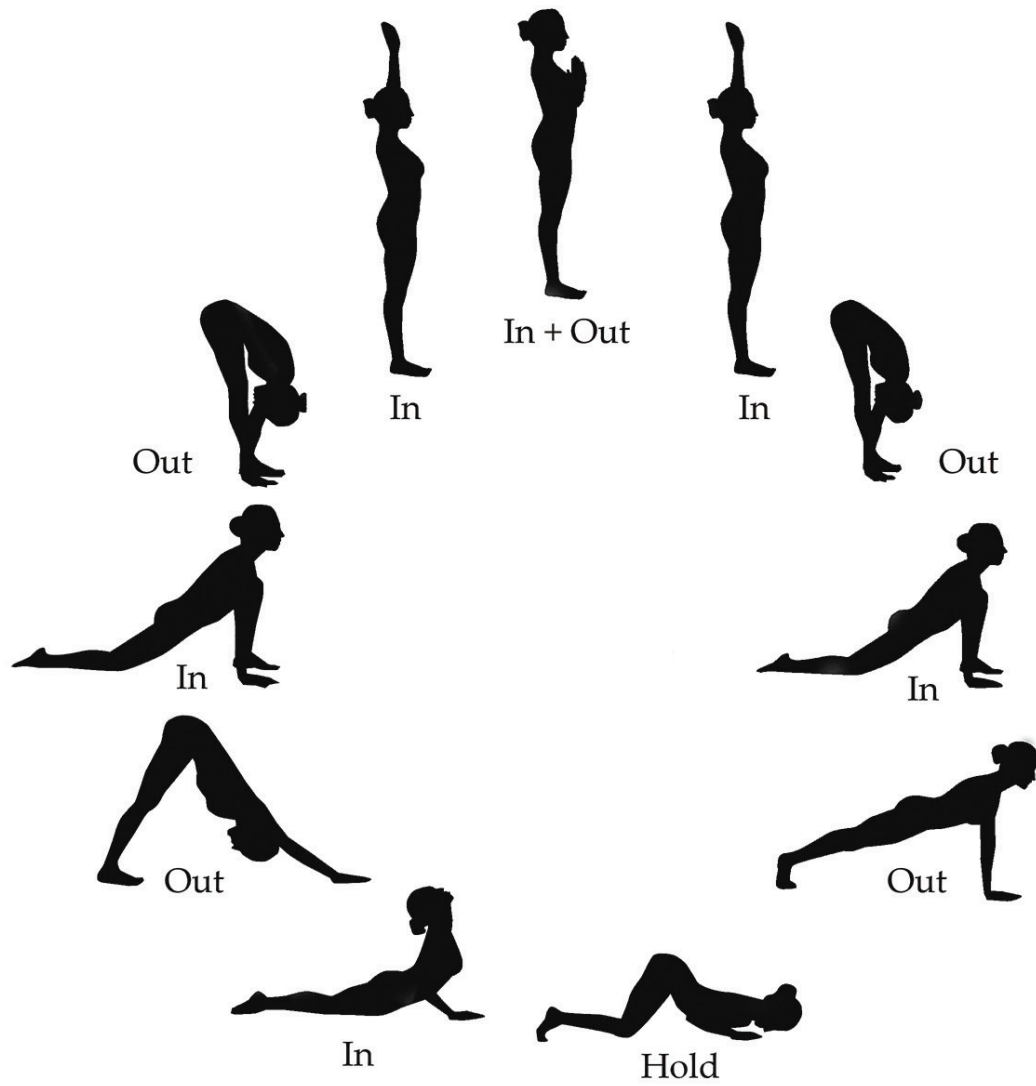
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|---|--------|
| 1. Pranamasana (Prayer pose) or Namskar Mudra | EXHALE |
| 2. Hastauttanasana (Upward Salute) | INHALE |
| 3. Uttanasana or Pada Hastasana (Standing Forward Bend) | EXHALE |
| 4. Low Lunge or Ardha Chandrasana (equestrian) | INHALE |
| 5. Ashtrangasana (Plank Pose) | HOLD |
| 5. Dandasana (Eight points salute) | EXHALE |
| 6. Bhujangasana (Cobra pose) | INHALE |
| 7. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) | EXHALE |
| 8. Low Lunge or Ardha Chandrasana (equestrian) | INHALE |
| 9. Uttanasana or Pada Hastasana (Standing Forward Bend) | EXHALE |
| 10. Hastauttanasana (Upward Salute) | INHALE |
| 11. Pranamasana (Prayer pose) or Namskar Mudra | EXHALE |

The Salutations in HATHA YOGA are a sequence of 12 asanas. Sun Salutations provide a good cardiovascular workout, stretch every part of the body, and when used with breath coordinate the body with the mind. Even more impressively, this sequence takes the spine through almost every possible range of motion. These postures can be used as a warm-up routine or as an exercise in themselves. The poses can be practiced slowly for deeper stretching and strength building or quickly for more of a cardiovascular workout.

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SURYA NAMASKAR



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HATHA YOGA by NICOLAS AMBROSETTI

RISHIKESH SERIE

Rishikesh is the celebrated city of the Rishi, masters of the vedic samhites, today considered the Yoga capital because of its numerous ashrams and the many opportunities it offers to attend courses in the ancient Indian discipline.

Swami Sivananda taught a way of practicing yoga that integrated all known systems of the ancient masters so this, known as the synthesis of yoga, is the basis of the yoga practiced today.

The Rishikesh series is a sequence of essential asana studied and taught in the famous ashram of Rishikesh and its popularity is due to some fundamental aspects that make the practice extremely effective. In fact the sequence has beneficial effects on the whole body as it favours the necessary conditions to restore both health and mental balance. It has been established that, if practiced daily, it is able to balance the body on all levels: physical, energetic, mental and emotional. The ancient masters sensed that each of the poses stimulated or activated one or more energy centers, known as Chakra, which regulated the flow of energy distributing it to the corresponding organs.

Due to its simplicity the sequence of asana can be performed by people of all physical constitutions, with varying degrees of flexibility and physical development and at all ages. Not that it does not require the use of common sense, especially regarding the constitution of the body, and respect for the signals that our own body gives us.

What's important is that the poses, if done properly, have the capacity and the important role of stimulating our psycho-physical development and setting us onto the path of yoga practice. Never worry about reaching "perfection" regarding flexibility and strength, but always proceed gradually and slowly, respecting the limits of your body and never forcing the posture.

The asanas of the Rishikesh Series are:

SARVANGASANA
SIRSHASANA
PASCHIMOTTANASANA
SHALABHASANA
ARDHA-MATSYENDRASANA
PADA HASTHASANA

HALASANA
MATSYASANA
BHUJANGASANA
DHANURASANA
KAKASANA
TRIKONASANA

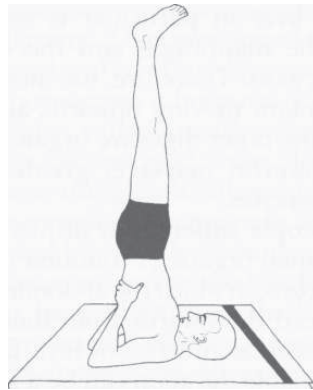
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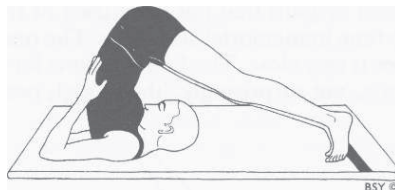
SARVANGASANA

The Sanskrit word sarvangasana is made up of three separate words: sarva, anga and asana. The word sarva means 'whole', 'all' or 'entire', the word anga means 'limbs', 'parts', 'organs' or 'members'. Sarvangasana is so called because it is an asana which influences the whole body and its functions. The Sanskrit name is perfect, as it exactly describes the fact that the asana affects the entire human organism. This total effect is achieved mainly by harmonizing the endocrinal system, especially the thyroid gland. The most common English name of the asana is 'shoulder stand pose'. It has various other names, including salamba sarvangasana (supported shoulder stand pose) and the panphysical pose.



HALASANA

The Sanskrit word hala means 'plough'. Halasana is so called because in its final pose it resembles a plough; not the modern mechanized plough but the wooden plough pulled by oxen or bulls that has been used in India since time immemorial and still is. The resemblance is very close. The English name for this asana is, not surprisingly, 'the plough pose'.



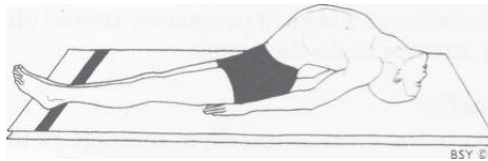
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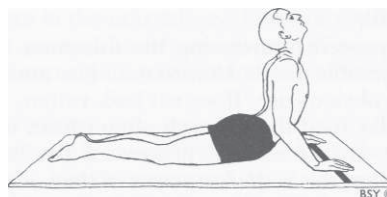
MATSYASANA

In Sanskrit the word matsya means 'fish'. Therefore, this asana can be translated as 'the fish pose'. At first this may seem a strange name for an asana that seems to bear no resemblance whatsoever to any kind of fish. However, if you use a little imagination you can see that the folded legs in padmasana resemble the tail of a fish ; the rest of the body represents the body of the fish, and the head corresponds to the head of the fish. This is not difficult to imagine. But there is a better reason why this asana is called the fish pose: it is an excellent position for floating in water for prolonged periods of time. The folded legs change the position of the centre of gravity (the centre of weight in the body); it moves nearer the head. This means that the head can be held higher above the water, allowing ease in respiration. Furthermore, since the legs are locked in a firm position, the body becomes more compact and rigid and therefore able to float in water with much less effort.



BHUJANGASANA

Bhujangasana emulates the action of the cobra raising itself just prior to striking at its prey. We have already discussed ardha bhujangasana, which is the preparatory pose for mastering bhujangasana¹. If your back is stiff then you should do ardha bhujangasana just before doing bhujangasana. Otherwise bhujangasana alone is sufficient.



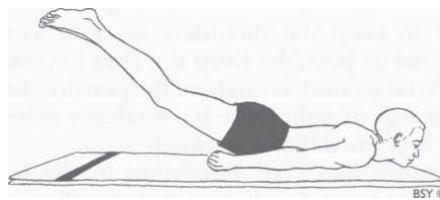
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SHALABHASANA

This asana is so called because the legs are raised in the final position to imitate the tail of a locust. It is also commonly known as the grasshopper pose for the same reason. It is an excellent backward bending asana which has a specific influence on the organs, muscles and nerves of the pelvis, abdomen and chest. It is also particularly noteworthy for the fact that it is one of the few asanas that gives a direct massage to the heart. Shalabhasana complements bhujangasana (cobra pose), for bhujangasana exercises the top part of the body, while shalabhasana correspondingly exercises the lower half of the body. For this reason try to perform them one after the other.



ARDHA-MATSYENDRASANA

This asana is named after the great yogi Matsyendranath, who is reputed to have performed meditational practices in the full form of this asana called matsyendrasana. This is one of the most difficult asanas in yoga, requiring a 'rubber body'. For this reason we will concern ourselves only with the easier half form of the asana at this stage. Later we will introduce the full form for those who have attained sufficient flexibility of body to attempt it without causing any injuries. As a matter of interest, there is a well-known and fascinating story attached to yogi Matsyendranath in Hindu mythology. It is said that long ago Lord Shiva was teaching his wife Parvati the fundamental practices of yoga beside a river. The aim was that yoga would be brought out of its secrecy and disseminated throughout the world. In the river was a large fish and it listened to the lessons with rapt attention. Parvati noticed the fish and told Lord Shiva. Immediately Shiva transformed the fish into the form of man - no other than yogi Matsyendranath. Because of the knowledge that he had acquired by his attentive hearing of Shiva's discourses Matsyendranath was from then onwards regarded as the human originator of yoga. It is said that all the yogic teachings that are now in existence have come from Matsyendranath, through his various disciples such as Gorakhnath.



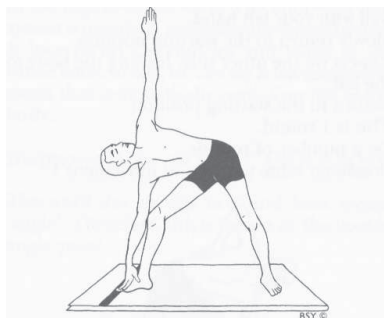
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TRIKONASANA

The word tri means 'three' and the word kona means 'angle'. Therefore, trikonasana can be translated as the 'three-angle pose'. However, it is usually called the 'triangle pose'. There are five distinct movements involved in the whole practice. They all start from the same standing position - that is, with the legs wide apart.



PASCHIMOTTANASANA

This asana has many other names. The most common are ugrasana (fierce or powerful pose) and paschimatanasana, which has the same meaning as paschimottanasana. There are many meanings associated with the name of this asana. Literally, the word paschima means 'the back', or 'posterior'; it also means 'the west'. The word utthan means 'to stretch'. Therefore, the usual English name of this asana is 'the back stretching pose'. The word utthan is also akin to the word 'tan', which makes up part of the word tantra [the mother system of yoga]. In this context, it is not physical stretching that is implied, but stretching or expansion of awareness. The word paschima still means the back, but has greater significance if it is taken to mean the sushumna nadi. This nadi is the most important psychic pathway in the body. During higher states of awareness, prana ascends this nadi from the bottom of the back [perineum] to the head [sahasrara]. In fact, it is said that the experience of higher awareness cannot take place unless prana flows within this nadi. So this asana has a very elevated meaning. It means the asana which expands awareness by unleashing pranic currents which flow upwards within the sushumna nadi. This is a fitting name, for this is indeed a powerful asana.



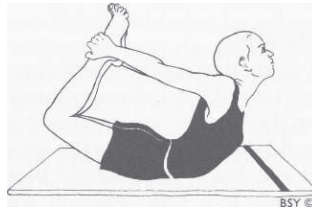
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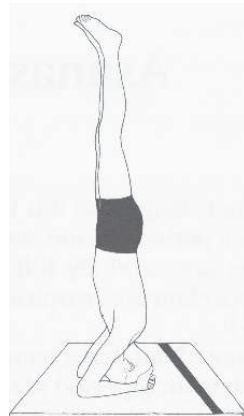
DHANURASANA

The Sanskrit word dhanu means 'a bow'. Therefore, this is called 'the bow pose', because in the final pose the body resembles a bow, the trunk and thighs representing the wooden part of the bow and the lower parts of the legs and the arms representing the bowstring. This is a perfect description of the asana. This is a well-known asana and mentioned in various yogic texts. To save unnecessary repetition we will merely quote a verse from the Gherand Samhita: «While lying on the ground, stretch your legs as straight as sticks. Catch hold of your feet with your hands behind the back. Adjust your body so that it takes the shape of a bow. Rock to and fro. This is dhanurasana according to the yogis.» [verse 1:19]



SIRSHASANA

The Sanskrit word sirsha means 'head'. Therefore, this asana can be translated as the 'headstand pose'. Strange though it may seem, sirshasana is not mentioned or described in any of the well-known yoga scriptures. Considering the benefits that it gives, this seems at first a little surprising. But more than likely the asana was passed on from guru to disciple by word of mouth and personal tuition. In this way, there was less likelihood of sirshasana being practised incorrectly and thereby causing harm. It is only in recent years that sirshasana has been fully explained in books and become widely popular with large numbers of people. Possibly the following quotation from the Gherand Samhita describes sirshasana under a different name: «The solar region is located in the navel and the lunar region is located at the root of the palate. Nectar drops downwards from the lunar region to the solar region and is absorbed; so do men die. Hold the navel upwards and the lunar region downwards. This is called vipareeta karani mudra, secret of the tantras. The head should be placed on the ground together with the arms. Point the legs upwards, keeping the head firmly on the ground. This is vipareeta karani mudra according to the yogis.» [verses 3:28, 29, 30]



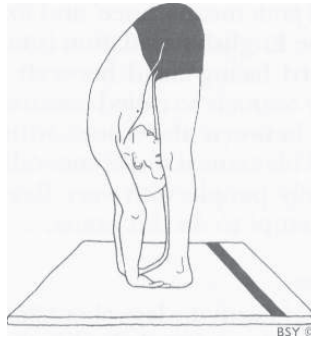
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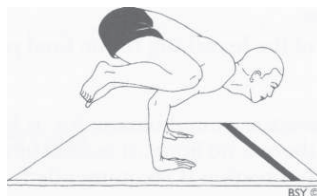
PADA HASTHASANA

The Sanskrit word angushtha means, both 'thumb' and 'big toe'; pada means 'foot'. Therefore, this asana can also be called 'the thumb to big toe pose'. It can only be done by people with reasonably flexible spinal muscles. It is done in exactly the same way as pada hastasana. The only difference is the position of the hands.



BAKASANA OR KAKASANA

The word baka means 'crane' and dhyana means 'meditation'. The crane is a long-legged bird that can be seen standing in the shallow water of rivers. The crane seems to be asleep, but as soon as an unsuspecting fish comes within its range, it pounces. The crane is calm and yet very alert and epitomizes the state of meditation. Baka dhyanasana is named after the reflective nature of the crane. Also the final position of the asana vaguely resembles a bird, the two arms being the bird's legs, the two feet the bird's tail and the head imitating the crane looking downwards into the water for fish. In English, the asana can be called 'the pose of the meditative crane'.



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Sirshasana



Sarvangasana



Halasana



Matsyasana



Paschimothasana



Bhujangasana



Salabhasana



Dhanurasana



Ardha Matsyendrasana



Kakasana



Pada Hasthasana



Trikonasana

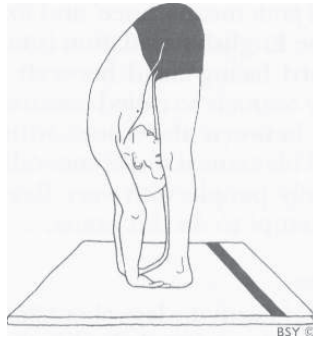
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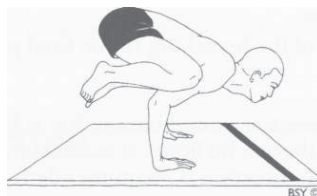
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