

Asana: The Physical Postures of Yoga
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The sage Patanjali wrote the Yoga Sutras approximately 2500 years ago. This text consists of 196 short statements about consciousness and how we can experience the essential nature of our being. Patanjali codified teachings that had been transmitted orally and which form the basic foundation of yoga philosophy. In his treatise, yoga practice is described as having eight constituents or limbs: ethics, discipline, physical postures, breathing, sense withdrawal, concentration, meditation and absorption in the divine.

Posture, or *asana*, is the most familiar part of yoga practice to many people. The great majority of students come to yoga because they want to feel better physically. This makes sense, as the body is the vehicle for mind and spirit, and the body tells us, through pain, when it is out of balance. Yoga posits that our journey to the innermost aspect of our being moves from the gross to the subtle, and from the known to the unknown. So we begin with the physical container, which we can see, touch and feel. Starting with the body helps us learn the effects of disciplined action, the truth of cause and effect, and the importance of mindfulness.

Other than being listed as one of the eight limbs of yoga, *asana* is only mentioned in three of the 196 sutras. The other sutras focus on subtle aspects of consciousness to be experienced through meditation. In this context, *asana* practice is meant to prepare the body for long periods of sitting still so that meditation practice can be done without physical pain and disturbance. The *asana* work brings ease to the body and quietude to the mind, preparing us to receive and practice more subtle teachings. Since there are only three sutras about *asana*, it is a good idea to know what they are and to reflect on their meaning.

These three sutras appear near the end of the second chapter or *Sadhana Pada* (practice chapter) of the Yoga Sutras. In Alistair Shearer's translation, these three sutras are:

II: 46 The physical postures should be steady and comfortable.

II:47 They are mastered when all effort is relaxed and the mind is absorbed in the Infinite.

II:48 Then we are no longer upset by the play of opposites.

The first of this set of sutras says that the posture should be steady, *sthira*, and comfortable, *sukha*. *Sthira* means that the body should be firm and steadfast and the mind fixed and unwavering. At the same time, the posture should be *sukha* – having the qualities of ease and relaxation. Anyone who has practiced yoga knows that at first, the postures are neither steady nor comfortable. We feel the physical work, the effort to balance, the stretch of tight muscles. The mind also lacks steadiness, as it moves from thought to thought. With time and practice, the body becomes more toned and aligned, and the mind more calm and present. We learn to watch the mind and remain at ease even while exerting ourselves. A pose that once left us trembling is now steady and comfortable. This process continues as we learn more challenging postures or increase the holding times for familiar postures. We learn and practice the balance of effort and ease, action and awareness.

The next sutra takes the idea of relaxed effort even further. It says that when effort is relaxed, the mind can be absorbed in the Infinite. Chip Hartranft translates "...effort relaxes and coalescence arises, revealing that the body and the infinite universe are indivisible." BKS Iyengar calls this state "effortless effort." This state might be likened to what athletes call being "in the zone." Body and mind experience unity and action is easy, effective and graceful. In yoga as in athletics, that state is experienced as the result of long, regular and

devoted practice, not only of physical skills, but also of heightened awareness. We cannot force or will ourselves to be in the zone of effortless effort, but we can prepare ourselves for the experience through disciplined practice.

Once this state, which Iyengar calls “a boundless state of oneness”, has been experienced many times, it is possible to experience a deeper fruition. We are no longer upset by the play of opposites, no longer disturbed by dualities. This sutra means that we are free from the suffering of heat and cold, pride and shame, pain and pleasure, or gain and loss. Most of us cannot imagine being free in this way. But as we practice yoga, we begin to notice that we are becoming more tolerant. Our comfort zone gets bigger. We become less fussy. We get too hot or too cold, but it is less of an irritation. We feel the sting of embarrassment, but we don't take it so hard. We are glad to get a promotion, but don't feel so self satisfied. Little by little, we learn to avoid extremes and experience evenness of mind.

Of the 196 aphorisms in the Yoga Sutras only these three mention asana, yet the asana practice is a major component of the way most of us practice yoga. This gives some indication that philosophy study, breathing practices and other aspects of yoga should not be neglected. Asana practice forms the firm foundation for other practices. These three sutras can help us penetrate and reflect upon where the asanas are leading us, to a state of effortless effort, unity, and freedom.