
**Literary Research on Yoga
Posture, Alignment and
Mindfulness**

2.0 LITERARY RESEARCH

2.1 REVIEW OF ANCIENT LITERATURE ON ALIGNMENT AND STABILITY OF YOGA POSTURE

Title: The concept of *Āsana* and the importance of mindful movement and stability defined in ancient Yoga texts

Background: Healthy body is essential for every individual to achieve their life goals. Though the western world has adopted more of physical components of Yoga such as physical postures, the classical approach in Yoga is being compromised and hence this compilation is needed to bring the traditional knowledge base to understand the practice of Yoga *Āsana*, and to use the inputs for developing a technology-based solution.

AIM

To study the importance of mindful movements and stability of yoga postures in ancient yoga scriptures and their relevance to practitioners.

OBJECTIVES

- i. To review ancient literature on alignment and stability of yoga postures.
- ii. To explore the suffering (*kleshas*), and hurdles in the progress of practicing yoga postures (*asanas*).

METHODOLOGY

VEDIC SOURCES AND CLASSICAL YOGIC TEXTS INCLUDES

The following Vedic and Yoga texts were used for understanding the source of disease.

- a. Yoga Texts – *Bhagavad Gita, Patanjali Yoga Sutra*
- b. Hatha Yogic Texts: *Hatha Yoga Pradeepika, Gherand Samhita, Siddha-Siddhant Padati,*
- c. *Upanishad – Yoga Vasistha*
- d. Internet sources

Inclusion criteria

The search captured only a subset of verses related to yoga postures, the procedure of practices, obstacles, or hindrances in yoga practices. Also, the search was based on the verses describing the sources of mindfulness in yoga postures, and benefits associated with yoga practices were included.

Exclusion criteria

The search captured only a definition of yoga, pranayama, and general information about the yoga practices were excluded. Multiple descriptions of the same entity were also excluded from the literature review.

2.1.1 Defining Yoga

The word 'Yoga' means 'Unity' or Oneness and it is derived from a Sanskrit word 'Yuj' meaning 'to join', i.e., joining individual consciousness with universal consciousness. Yoga is the science of right living, which all must incorporate in daily life. It works on all aspects of the person viz. physical, mental, emotional, psychic and spiritual (Iyengar, 1970).

Yoga posture (*asāna*) is one of the components of yoga practices that brings the transformation at the level of the action itself (mainly at the physical level) and reaches to a deeper level. However, in the west, yoga posture is synonymous of physical exercise, which is a misunderstanding of the practice. Yoga postures (*asāna*) are connected with rhythmic breathing and mental alert-full state of mind which refine our awareness through self-observation. The broad concept of yoga is well defined in a yoga text known as *Patanjali Yoga Sutra* i.e., yoga is the ability to direct the mind towards an object and sustain that direction without any distraction. Sage *Patanjali* addresses the concept of yoga postures in the form of the sutra '*Sthira sukham asanam*' (chapter 2/46), it means, yoga

posture is not merely the physical movement but also, having the alter, stable, and relaxation state at a physical and mental level. Overall, yoga postures have dual qualities i.e., alertness and relaxation.

Healthy body is essential for every individual to achieve their life goals. Though the western world has adopted more of physical components of Yoga such as physical postures, the classical approach in Yoga is being compromised and hence this compilation is needed to bring the traditional knowledge base to understand the practice of Yoga *Āsana*, and to use the inputs for developing a technology-based solution.

According to *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* Yoga is defined as:

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥ १ ॥२ ॥

yogaścittavāṭṭinirodhaḥ || 1.2||

Yoga is a process of gaining control over the mind

Chitta is derived from the basic idea of *chit*, which means to see, to be conscious of, to be aware. Hence, *chitta* means individual consciousness, which includes the conscious state of mind, the subconscious state of mind and also the unconscious state of mind. The totality of these three states of individual mind is symbolized by the expression *chitta*. *Chitta* has been differently accepted in Vedanta, but here *chitta* represents the whole of the individual consciousness, which is comprised of three stages: the sense or objective consciousness, the subjective or astral consciousness, and the unconsciousness or mental state of dormant potentiality. These three states of pure consciousness should be understood as the *chitta* referred to in this sutra.

The word *chitta* means the consciousness as a whole, in and outside the body, with and without it. In brief, the consciousness is like a thread connecting many lives and incarnations.

It is very important for a spiritual aspirant to analyze the predominance of the three gunas and to find out the guna in power at the moment. It is a rare moment when all the gunas have an equal influence on a person. One guna always holds sway over the others and rules, even though the other gunas have an equal chance of operation. For example, when rajas is in power there is always a countermovement of the other gunas, resulting in a state of concentration and dissipation following each other. Therefore, one has to realize which particular guna is in absolute power at the moment and how countermovement's are taking place. If there is more dissipation and less concentration, then it is rajas. If there is less concentration and less dissipation but more snoring and sleep, it means tamas is predominating. If there is more concentration and less dissipation and less sleep, it means *sattwa* is predominating.

After having analyzed the influence of the three gunas over consciousness, one should find out ways to eliminate the negative influence of a particular guna and to develop the influence of a positive guna.

Ekagrata means one- pointedness and in this *rajo guna* and *tamo guna* are absent; only *sattwa guna* is present. When the mind attains a one- pointed state, at that time rajas and tamas are both totally absent; *sattwa* alone prevails. When this stage is arrived at, then the last one to be achieved is *nirodha*, complete cessation. In this, neither tamas, nor rajas, nor *sattwa guna* functions. That is a state of mind called *trigunatita*, beyond the three *gunas*, when the consciousness is rendered absolutely free from the clutches of the three *gunas*. When your individual consciousness is rendered free from the clutches of the three *gunas*

and when your consciousness stays alone, without any friendship or without any alliance with these three *gunas*, that state of consciousness is called *nirodha*. (Sinha, 1964).

According to *Yoga Vasista*, the importance of yoga is defined as:

मनःप्रशमनोपायःयोगः इत्यभिधीयते ।३-६-२ ॥

manaùpraçamanopäyaùyogaù ityabhidhiäyate|3-6-2||

Yoga is the skilful action to calm down the mind

According to Sri Aurobindo:

“*Yoga is a methodological effort towards the self-perfection by the development potentialities, which is the individual*” – Sri Aurobindo (Sinha, 1964)

According to *Bhagavadgita*, it is defined as a skill as well as a tool to achieve balance:

योगस्थह् कुरु कर्मणि सन्गाम् त्यक्त्व धनन्जय

सिद्धयसिद्धयोह् समो भुत्व समत्वम् योग उच्यते ॥ २-४८ ॥

yogasthah kuru karmāṇi saṅgam tyaktvā dhanañjaya /

siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṃ yoga ucyate / 2.48 //

Lord Krishna further describes – “Being established in Yoga one must perform actions.

Evenness [of mind] is the Yoga” (Pillai, 2021)

If action is not to be undertaken by one who is under the impulsion of the fruits of action, how then are they to be undertaken? This is being stated: *Yogasthah*, by becoming established in Yoga; O *Dhanajaya*, kuru, undertake; *karmāni*, actions, for the sake of God alone; even there, *tyaktva*, casting off; *sangam*, attachment, in the form, 'God will be pleased with me.' ['Undertake work for pleasing God, but not for propitiating Him to become favourable towards yourself.] Undertake actions *bhūtvā*, remaining; *samah*,

eipoised; *siddhi-asidhyoh*, in success and failure even in the success characterized by the attainment of Knowledge that arises from the purification of the mind when one performs actions without hankering for the results, and in the failure that arises from its opposite. [Ignorance, arising from the impurity of the mind.] What is that Yoga with regard to being established in which it is said, 'undertake'? This indeed is that: the *samatvam*, equanimity in success and failure; *ucyate*, is called; *yogah*, Yoga (Pillai, 2021).

Yoga is skill in action

बुद्धियुक्तो जहतिह उभे सुकृतदुस्कृते

तस्मद्योगय युज्यस्व योग कर्मसु कौशलम् ॥२-५० ॥

buddhiyukto jahātīha ubhe sukṛtaduṣkṛte |

tasmādyogāya yujyasva yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam ||2.50||

Listen to the result that one possessed of the wisdom of equanimity attains by performing one's own duties: *Buddhi-yuktah*, possessed of wisdom, possessed of the wisdom of equanimity; since one *jahati*, rejects; *iha*, here, in this world; *ubhe*, both; *sukṛta-duskrte*, virtue and vice (righteousness and unrighteousness), through the purification of the mind and acquisition of Knowledge; *tasmat*, therefore; *yujyasva*, devote yourself; *yogaya*, to (*Karma-*) yoga, the wisdom of equanimity. For Yoga is *kausalam*, skilfulness; *karmasu*, in action. Skilfulness means the attitude of the skilful, the wisdom of equanimity with regard to one's success and failure while engaged in actions (karma) called one's own duties (*svadharma*) with the mind dedicated to God. That indeed is skilfulness which, through equanimity, makes actions that by their very nature bind give up their nature! Therefore, be you devoted to the wisdom of equanimity. (Pillai, 2021)

2.1.2 Techniques of Yoga

While several techniques have been described in traditional texts and more number of techniques have been derived in recent times, the eight limbed method prescribed by sage *Pathanjali* remains the most composite approach in Yoga Sadhana.

Sage *Pathanjali* describes it as *Astanga* Yoga:

यमनियमासनप्राणायामप्रत्याहारधारणाध्यानसमाधयोऽष्टावङ्गानि ॥ २.२९ ॥

yamaniyamāsanaprāṇāyāmapratyāhāradhāraṇādhyānasamādhayo'sṭāvāṅgāni || 2.29||

Asanas (Physical postures) occupy the third limb of *Astanga* Yoga. Though *Asanas* are the most popular techniques of yoga apart from *Meditation* and *Pranayama*, they play an important role in preparing an individual physical and mentally for higher Yoga practices.

2.1.3 Definition of an Āsana (Physical Posture)

An *āsana* is a body posture, originally and still a general term for a sitting meditation pose, and later extended in hatha yoga and modern yoga as exercise, to any type of pose or position, adding reclining, standing, inverted, twisting, and balancing poses. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali define "*āsana*" as "[a position that] is steady and comfortable". Patanjali mentions the ability to sit for extended periods as one of the eight limbs of his system. *Āsana* are also called yoga poses or yoga postures in English(Iyengar, 1970).

Definition of body posture according to *Patanjali Yoga Sutra*(Iyengar, 1993)

स्थिरसुखम् आसनम् ॥ २.४६ ॥

sthirasukham āsanam || 2.46||

Practicing yoga with strength and in a relaxed manner gives rise to harmony with the

physical body (*āsanas*). ||46||

प्रयत्नशैथिल्यानन्तसमापत्तिभ्याम् ॥ २.४७ ॥

prayatnaśaithilyānantasamāpattibhyām || 2.47||

By slight effort and meditating on the unlimited, the posture becomes firm and pleasant.

Definition of Āsana according to *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* Pradīpika,

(Pradīpika, H. Y. 1993)

अथ आसनम्

हठस्य प्रथमाङ्गत्वादासनं पूर्वमुच्यते ।

कुर्यात्तदासनं स्थैर्यमारोग्यं चाङ्ग-लाघवम् ॥

haṭhasya prathamāṅgatvādāsanam pūrvamucyate |

kuryāttadāsanam sthairyamārogyam cāṅga-lāghavam||

Being the first accessory of *Haṭha Yoga*, *āsana* is described first. It should be practised for gaining steady posture, health and lightness of body.

2.1.4 Preparations needed to start the practice of Āsana

Before practicing asanas a practitioner has to be prepared physically and mentally. Gentle joint loosening exercises, stretching and warming up exercises can prepare the individual to start the practice of basic set of Asanas which can further help in moving towards advanced postures.

It is important to practice Asanas in a quiet natural surrounding (if possible) with light clothing and good ventilation. Intake of food plays an important role. Asanas should be practiced in empty stomach or only after 3-4 hours after a meal.

हठस्य प्रथमाङ्गत्वादासनं पूर्वमुच्यते ।

कुर्यात्तदासनं स्थैर्यमारोग्यं चाङ्ग-लाघवम् ॥

haṭhasya prathamāṅgatoādāsanam pūrvamucyate ।

kuryāttadāsanam sthairyamārogyam cāṅga-lāghavam ॥

Āsana, being the initial limb of *Haṭha*, is spoken of first. *Āsana* brings about steadiness, improved health and lightness of limb.

Precaution to be taken before starting the practice of physical postures after undergoing any major surgery. Also, patients suffering from any health problem should consult a Yoga therapy physician to get a prescription for disease specific Yoga practices.

2.1.5 Classification of *Asanans*

The 10th or 11th century *Goraksha Sataka* and the 15th century *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* identify 84 *Āsana*; the 17th century *Gheranda Samhita* has detailed 37 postures, while *Hatha Ratnavali* provides a different list of 84 *Āsana*. In the 20th century, Indian nationalism favored physical culture in response to colonialism. In that environment, pioneers such as Yogendra, Kuvalayananda, and Krishnamacharya taught a new system of *Āsana* (incorporating systems of exercise as well as traditional hatha yoga). Among Krishnamacharya's pupils were influential Indian yoga teachers including PattabhiJois, founder of Ashtanga vinyasa yoga, and B.K.S. Iyengar, founder of Iyengar yoga. Together they described hundreds more *Asanans*, revived the popularity of yoga, and brought it to the Western world. Many more *Āsana* have been devised since Iyengar's 1966 *Light on Yoga* which described some 200 *Āsana*. Hundreds more were illustrated by Dharma Mitra.

Āsana were claimed to provide both spiritual and physical benefits in medieval hatha yoga texts. More recently, studies have provided evidence that they improve flexibility, strength, and balance; to reduce stress and conditions related to it; and specifically, to alleviate some diseases such as asthma and diabetes (Toshev & Szegedy, 2014).

Āsana have appeared in culture for many centuries. Religious Indian art depicts figures of Buddha, Shiva, and Jain tirthankaras in the lotus position and other meditation seats, and in the "royal ease" position, *lalitasana*.

In recent times *Asanas*, are also classified based on the categories to which they belong to i.e., (i) Meditative (ii) Cultural (iii) Relaxation postures. However, based on the position in which postures are done, *Asanas* are also classified into: (i) Standing postures, (ii) Sitting postures, (iii) Prone positions and (iv) Supine postures.

Āsana have appeared in culture for many centuries. Religious Indian art depicts figures of Buddha, Shiva, and Jain tirthankaras in the lotus position and other meditation seats, and in the "royal ease" position, *lalitāsana*. With the popularity of yoga as exercise, *Āsana* feature commonly in novels and films, and sometimes also in the advertising (Ross & Thomas, 2010).

2.1.6 Hurdles in the progress for practicing advanced postures

It is important to maintain balance at mental and physical levels in order to progress in Yoga sadhana.

Citta Vikshepa's act as hurdles for progressing in this path which include:

व्याधिस्त्यानसंशयप्रमादालस्याविरतिभ्रान्तिदर्शनालब्धभूमिकत्वानवस्थितत्वानि

चित्तविक्षेपास्तेऽन्तरायाः ॥ १.३० ॥

vyādhistyānasamśayapramādālasyaṅviratibhrāntidarśanālabdhabhūmikatvānavasthitatvā

ni cittavikṣepāste'ntarāyāḥ || 1.30||

Disorder, dullness, doubt, carelessness, laziness, over-indulgence, fallacious views, non-attainment of a stage and losing stability. In addition, the citta-vikshepa sahabuvas can further act as obstacles:

दुःखदौर्मनस्याङ्गमेजयत्वश्वासप्रश्वासा विक्षेपसहभुवः ॥ १.३१ ॥

duḥkhadaurmanasyāṅgamejayatvaśvāsapraśvāsā vikṣepasahabhuvāḥ || 1.31||

Suffering, negative thinking, unsteadiness in body and inhalation and exhalation, accompany the distractions.

According to Yoga Sutra of *Patanjali*, there are five primary cause of suffering / pain as described here:

अविद्य-अस्मित-रग-द्वेष-अभिनिवेस क्लेश ॥ PYS 2.3 ॥

avidyā-asmitā-rāga-dveṣa-abhiniveśā kleśa (PYS 2.3)

Avidyā (ignorance; lack of spiritual knowledge); asmitā (I-feeling, ego); raga (liking, desire, attachment); dveṣa (repulsion, hate, dislike); abhiniveśāḥ (fear of death); kleśāḥ (afflictions, pain).

Every human being is having klesha or painful experiences and but they are present in our subconscious mind. Because of superficial daily activities, it does not allow us to be aware of them. These five *kleshas* disturb the equilibrium of consciousness i.e., ignorance, or lack of wisdom, ego, pride of the ego or the sense of 'I', attachment to pleasure, aversion to pain, fear of death and clinging to life.

The affliction are three levels, intellectual, emotional and instinctive. *Avidya* and *Asmita* belong to the field of intelligence; here lack of spiritual knowledge combined with pride or arrogance inflates the ego, causing conceit and the loss of one's sense of balance. *Raga* and *dvesa* is known as excessive desire and attachment or allowing oneself to be carried away by expressions of hatred, creating disharmony between body and mind, which may lead to psychosomatic disorders.

Due to lack of true knowledge (*avidya*), all pain, suffering, and other obstacles arise such as arrogance, desire, aversion, and thirst to survive. The obstacles/*antarāyāḥ*, in order to help us leap beyond these hurdles (of the *citta*) with an awareness of their existence. As mentioned, the text spells out that, in the course of progress there could be certain impediments that invariably hinder and disturb *citta* (*citta vikṣepa*), and they are:

व्याधिस्त्यानसंशयप्रमादालस्याविरतिभ्रान्तिदर्शनालब्धभूमिकत्वानवस्थितत्वानि

चित्तविक्षेपास्तेऽन्तरायाः ॥ १ ॥३० ॥

vyādhistyānasamśayapramādālasyaaviratibhrāntidarśanālabdhabhūmikatvānavasthitatvā

ni cittavikṣepāste'ntarāyāḥ || 1.30||

Sickness, incompetence, doubt, delusion, mental and physical fatigue, inability to withdraw from the sense cravings, false visions, inability to reach the goal and inability to retain it all throw our *citta* outward. These distractions are the impediment (Vivekananda, 2021).

The nine obstacles can be classified into four categories – physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual. *Vyādhi* and *styāna* are physical obstacles; *samśaya*, *pramāda*, *ālasya* and *avirati* are mental obstacles; *bhrāntidarśana* is an intellectual obstacle; while *ālabdhabhūmikatva* and *navasthitatva* are spiritual in nature (Iyengar, 1993). Most times these hindrances occur subsequently, with varying degrees. Even the finest

practitioners/*sādhakās* encounter one/many of these obstacles, at some point in time. On the other hand, these primary obstacles also lead us to four other debilitating conditions.

दुःखदौर्मनस्याङ्गमेजयत्वश्वासप्रश्वासा विक्षेपसहभुवः ॥ १.३१ ॥

duḥkhadaurmanasyāṅgamejayatvaśvāsapraśvāsāvīkṣepasahabhuvaḥ || PYS. 1.31||

Pain, mental agitation, unsteadiness or trembling of limbs, irregular breathing patterns further disturb the *citta* (Tigunait, 2014). In the process of defending these obstacles that upset our body and *citta*, considerable amounts of resources collapse that could otherwise be channelized towards a higher purpose. Beyond these barriers, Sage *Patañjali* indicates a group of five more obstacles – *kleśās*.

These *kleshās* and obstacles should be minimized or eradicated by the process of involution. The five afflictions have four stages i.e., latency, attenuated, alternating, and active. Sage Patanjali says yoga is a preventive healing arts, science, and philosophy, by which we build up robust health in body and mind and construct a defensive strength with to deflect or counteract afflictions. Moreover, strong health and stable mind will enable us to face the wonder of wonders – the spiritual bliss – if and when, thanks to our good actions in former lives, the spiritual gate is set open.

Possible solutions for suffering and afflictions are given in yoga scriptures With this understanding of the afflictions, here is a glance upon certain practices in mindful awareness (to tackle the modifications of the *citta*) that are referred to in the *Yogaūtra*.

मैत्रिकरुनमुदितोपेक्सनम् सुखदुःखपुन्यपुन्यविसयनम्

भवनतस्चित्तप्रसदनम् ||PYS. 1.33||

maitrīkaruṇāmuditopekṣāṅām sukhaduḥkhaḥpunyāpunyaviṣayāṅām

bhāvanātaścittaprasādanam ||PYS. 1.33||

In worldly relationships, the *citta* becomes subtler and subtler by cultivating of right attitude of friendliness towards those who are happy, compassion for those who are suffering, goodwill towards those who are virtuous, and indifference or neutrality towards those we perceive as wicked or evil.

Sailing through life, we encounter four types of people – those who are happy, those who are miserable, those who are virtuous and also those who are vicious. However, by adopting a sublime attitude towards them, as indicated in this *sūtra*, one remains dynamic while interacting with this material world. Nonetheless, the burden of past tendencies is the greatest impediment.

Sage Patanjali has introduced us with the idea that union as much as he also describes the disunion or *viyoga*. The disunion is getting rid of all the afflictions that can be shattered solely by diligent practice of yoga postures, breathing techniques, relaxation, and meditation practices.

While several techniques have been described in traditional texts and more number of techniques have been derived in recent times, the eight limbed method prescribed by sage *Pathanjali* remains the most composite approach in Yoga Sadhana.

Sage *Pathanjali* describes it as *Astanga* Yoga:

यमनियमासनप्राणायामप्रत्याहारधारणाध्यानसमाधयोऽष्टावङ्गानि ॥ २.२९ ॥

yamaniyamāsanaprāṇāyāmapratyāhāradhāraṇādhyānasamādhayo'sṭāvāṅgāni || 2.29||

Asanas (Physical postures) occupy the third limb of *Astanga* Yoga. Though *Asanas* are the most popular techniques of yoga apart from *Meditation* and *Pranayama*, they play an important role in preparing an individual physical and mentally for higher Yoga practices.

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2.1.7 Concepts of *Sthira* and *Sukha* as measures of alignment and proficiency

As defined by sage *Pathanjali*, any posture which is stable and comfortable is called as a *Yogasana*. Stability depends on several factors which are intrinsic and extrinsic to an individual. Three major factors add to this process which includes: (i) alignment, (ii) balance and (iii) proficiency.

The musculoskeletal system plays a very important role in achieving right alignment and balance while maintaining a posture. Proficiency comes only by practice.

तत्र स्थितौ यत्नोऽभ्यासः ॥ १.१३ ॥

tatra sthitau yatno'bhyāsah || 1.13||

Practice is the effort to remain there.

स तु दीर्घकालनैरन्तर्यसत्कारासेवितो दृढभूमिः ॥ १.१४ ॥

sa tu dīrghakālanairantaryasatkārāsevito dṛḍhabhūmiḥ || 1.14||

Moreover, it is suggested that the practice should be done for a longer period, regularly, with dedication in order to get established in that posture.

2.1.8 Conclusion:

Asanas play an important role in Yoga practice. They are designed to help an individual to progress from a basic to advanced level through a systematic process. Asanas should be performed in a manner where body remains stable and comfortable. To achieve this a better understanding of the concepts of alignment, balance and proficiency is needed.