

ASANAS: postures, third limb of Yoga

2.46: *The physical postures should be steady and comfortable.*

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

2.48: *Then we are no longer upset by the play of opposites ... (between body and mind).*

(Patanjali: The Yoga Sutras)

In the West, the first approach to yoga is often through postures, particularly body positions such as standing, lying, inverting, sitting, and so on. The Sanskrit word related to posture (*āsana*) is linked to the seated position, or series of postures that lead up to it. It introduces deeper components of yoga, **such as breath control and meditation**, and prepares the body and the mind to sitting for long periods of time. Practising *āsana* also means purifying the system, and maintaining body and mind in a state of well-being, training ourselves to being present in our body: physical stability, but above all presence, attention, and mental stillness. Complementary to that, softness and ease; it is about adapting postures to physical possibilities without force or excessive will: *“Attention without tension, loosening up without slackness” (T.V Desikachar)*. Practising postures and breathing techniques together is what is called “Hatha Yoga”.

Postures and our ability to perform them is affected by our body shape (individual skeletal structure), our flexibility and our strength (ligaments and muscles). With regular exercise and appropriate posture alignment, we can improve our flexibility, our strength (*stira* and *stukha*) and also correct skeletal unbalances. Our bones affect our structure; muscles and ligaments affect our movements.

Five factors can influence our muscular efficiency:

1. **Stretching:** it is essential to warm-up muscles with initial stretches to maximise the potential tension of the muscles.
2. **Temperature:** a warm muscle works more efficiently than a cold muscle
3. **Viscosity:** blood viscosity decreases with a warm-up and blood circulation improves.
4. **Speed of performance:** if movements are done at a slow or moderate speed, less energy is wasted to overcome the frictions between muscular fibres
5. **Fatigue:** tired muscles are inefficient and weak. It is important to relax between exercises and asanas to let the muscles recover.

Vinyasa yoga, which is a very flowing and constantly moving practice, belongs to what is sometimes called “yang yoga”. It is an aerobic practice that strengthens the body and brings about a feeling of achievement and well-being. It is good for developing strength and stamina; also it eliminates toxins. However working only on Yang yoga will not improve flexibility in the long run, and will not bring about a durable change to the body. This is where “yin yoga” comes into the picture. Yin yoga is about holding the postures, with the correct alignment, and relaxing into it. Progressively connective tissues will release their grips on bones and muscles and allow the joints to open up. In my practice, I aim at a balance between yin and yang yoga, developing what Patanjali calls *sthira* and *sukha*,

steadiness and smoothness in the body as well as in the mind. A balanced session will follow this pattern: initial relaxation, warm up, stretching, sequences, peak postures, counter postures and final relaxation.

There are 5 types of postures:

- Forward bends
- Backwards bends
- Twists
- Inversions
- Restorative postures

The programme for this series will be as follow:

- **Week 1: Forward bends**
- **Week 2: Backward bends**
- **Week 3: Twists**
- **Week 4: inversion**
- **Week 5: holding postures, restorative yoga using props**

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Week 1: Forward bends

Forward bends allow the breath to circulate in the central Nadi (energy channel: susumna), stimulate digestion (massage of internal organs) and reduce fat in the abdominal area. They cleanse the kidneys and bring flexibility in the spine and correcting excessive arching of the lower back. They also regulate the function of the pancreas by controlling metabolism and sugar level in the blood. It has a pampering effect and relaxes the nervous system. It is good for controlling depression and anxiety.

Week 2: Backward bends

This week we continue with exploring the different planes of asanas (physical postures). Last week we focused on **forward bends**. This week we will focus on **back bends**.

Forward bends (FB) equate to the flow of *Prana* : the current of energy or *Vayu* that sends the flow of energy up the spine. It is a warm, golden and positive energy. **Back bends (BB)** equate to the flow of *Apana*: the current of energy or *Vayu* that sends energy down the spine. It is a cool, silver and negative energy. These two flows are complementary: *Prana* is for renewed positive energy, *Apana* for elimination of negative energy. The seat of *Prana* is the heart centre, the seat of *Apana* is the perineum.

Although we are concentrating on back bends, our physical practice will include forward bends as counter postures followed by a breathing practice called *anu loma viloma* (Anu: molecule, Loma: flow of prana, viloma: flow of apana), in order to maintain the correct body/mind alignment. We will end the session with a full relaxation practice, so at the end of the session you will feel fully energised and peaceful, ready to face the rest of the week.

Some examples of postures and counter postures: (*supine*: on your back, *prone*: on your front)

- **Forward bends:** Single leg lifts: supine, gentle FB (head to knee), sits up: full forward bend, boat, plow, shoulder stand ...
- **Back bends:** Single leg lifts: prone, reversed table top, fish, bridge, cobra, upwards dog, locust, bow, dancer, wheel, diamond, camel ...
- **Combination of the two and rebalancing postures:** dynamic cat/cow, twists, inversions ...
- **Restful postures:** apanasana (wind relieving posture), savasana (corpse posture), tadasana (mountain posture)

Moving from simple to complex along the path of least resistance:

Yoga practice cultivates consciously the path of our own change and transformation. However if we try to leap ahead of what we are presently able to do with a sense of steadiness and ease, we cut ourselves off from the transformative process, and rather dive into frustration and unease.

So this is why we need to move conscious step by conscious step towards whatever we want to achieve. When practising asanas, rather than creating a random sequence of asanas, it is important to place asanas in relationship to each other in a way that makes each one more accessible. Yoga students benefit from first learning basic asanas before attempting complex ones, playing their edge with each breath along the way.

Moving from dynamic to static exploration: moving into stillness

We are inherently dynamic beings. Our yoga practice should allow this natural quality. Even in stillness, our heart is beating, the circulatory system is functioning, nerve impulses are traveling through the body, the breath is flowing in and out. It does not make much sense to try to torture your body to reproduce a “pose” from a screen shot: it is an internal experience. What we want to develop is a sense of inner balance, strength and flexibility and a clearer awareness. So, when we “move into stillness” the idea is to move into a posture progressively and start working on it, performing series of refining movements for a stronger stability, with an ease to the breath and the mind. “Moving into stillness” (Erich Schiffmann) is a concept that applies to the entire Yoga practice.

Week 3, Twists

... penetrate deep into the body core. They stimulate and tonify the body internal organs, particularly the liver and the kidneys. They also create more suppleness and freedom in the spine; whilst opening the chest, shoulders, neck and hips. Regular twisting helps maintain the normal length and resilience of the spine’s soft tissues and the health of the vertebral disks and facet joints, restoring/maintaining the spine’s natural range of motion. It is a way to unwind the accumulated physical and emotional tensions. Twists are neither cooling or warming, and bring the body/mind to a neutral sattvic state. Finally twists mildly stimulate the nervous system and calm anxiety as well as relieving lethargy.

In this week session, we will introduce twists gradually throughout the warming up part (lying twists: dynamic), followed by standing twists such as the revolved triangle (parivrtta trikonasana). Finally we will explore seated twists such as sage Marichi's posture and sage Bharadvaj's pose. Twists can also be explored through other families of postures such as the camel pose, chair, side angle postures, wide legs forward bend, etc.

Counter postures will include symmetrical postures, wide angle forward fold pose or Supta Badha Konasna (butterfly), to realign the hips and the legs; together with simple back bends to open the chest, such as "Bridge" (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana) and forward bends such as the "wind relieving posture" (apanasana) for releasing tension in the spine and the abdomen.

Week 4, Inversions

Monkeys and bats, hanging upside down in the trees, must have known about the benefits of inversion long before humans figured it out!

You probably heard this expression "putting your feet up" before. Inversions have the same calming effect on the lymphatic system, reducing swelling and heaviness. It usually involves putting your feet above your head; but there are some inversion techniques, such as the Dolphin Pose in yoga, where although the head and feet are both on the ground, the heart is elevated above the head.

Inversions have a multitude of health benefits! The inverted position reverses the harmful effects of gravity: it counteracts the constant downward pull of the upright position. With age, internal organs start losing their tone and have a tendency to sag. So inversions are a natural way of helping to correct that process. It creates heat and improves circulation in the body and have a positive effect on most systems in the body (digestive, endocrine etc) It may also be an effective treatments for back and joints issues, strengthening the back muscles as well as load bearing joints.

It improves the nervous system, reducing mental stress. Inversions improve your concentration and sense of focus. It creates a feeling of elation, re-introducing you to your inner-child. While Yoga is a contemplative endeavour in many ways, the asana practice is also a time to be playful and light hearted! It is improving the mind's functions generally.

Psychologically, it requires humility and perseverance, as a lot of them (Handstand, Headstand, plow, shoulder-stand) are challenging postures. You have to be careful with your neck and your spine and proceed slowly with them. If the postures create discomfort, then do not continue with them until you are feeling stronger.

Pregnancy time, unless you have mastered Handstand and Headstand before, is not a good time to learn these postures, as you need to put some pressure on your core to keep your balance. In any case, I would not recommend pregnant women to hold them for a long period of time during pregnancy.

However, as usual, using props and supports (blocks, blanket, wall, chair), variations and modifications do help to take the pressure away from "performing" whilst having the same benefits. This is what we are going to explore this week. Time to move to your mat and get upside down!

Week 5, holding postures

As I mentioned it last week, “Moving into stillness” is a concept that applies to the entire yoga practice. Going into a more advanced stage of a posture implies that you have already mastered the basic posture and are ready to come progressively into a more challenging version. **IF you do NOT feel comfortable** in this more challenging version; then step back. Do not hesitate to use props such as blocks, belts, socks ... whatever helps you to keep your body aligned and your mind happy!

Remember: *you do not live to do yoga better; you do yoga to live better!*

Relaxation is one of the 5 principles of yoga according to the Sivananda tradition. Savasana traditionally symbolises the end of a session: time to relax. Indeed a lot of people are so relaxed that they often fall asleep! However, savasana is not just a time to relax the body. This is an ideal time to develop your ability to feel your energies as it is more difficult to do this when you are in the other postures. This is why I use it not only at the end of a session; but also, for a shorter period, at the beginning of a session, and sometimes in between postures. I also use the standing version “Tadasana”, the mountain pose, to the same effect. Use these “parking spaces” times to pay attention to the energies flowing. You might need a bit of imagination to start with; but, in time, you will notice it more easily. In Savasana, lying straight on your back is not always the most comfortable position. Again, “Adaptation” is the key word: modify your posture according to your needs. Bending your knees or placing a blanket or a bolster under your knees may be helpful. If this is not good enough you can lie on your side.

Now how are we “moving into stillness” in all the other postures? How deep are we supposed to go?

Obviously everybody is different. The idea is to bring our tissues to a level of stress, that, initially, weakens the tissue. When we release the stress, the tissues recover and become stronger. However, if we apply too much stress, or do not allow enough rest between postures, then we might be in danger. If we stress and rest the tissues, the tissues’ tolerance level increases above what it was before. But over-stress or holding the stress for too long might result in injury. This is where we are the only reliable judge of our ability to progress. Again, this is the “Goldilocks” position: don’t go for too deep, for too much; but don’t go for too little either. To go deeper in Yoga does not necessarily mean to move further in a pose; but to hold for longer.

Ultimately, as in Savasana, what we want to achieve is ease and comfort in all postures. To achieve this, we need to control the flow of our energies through the respiration, and consciously direct this flow to the parts of our body that needs it: focus, awareness are the key words for a beneficial and rewarding practice.



"I said, savasana is over!"