III. Asana

Usually, yoga seems to be associated more with the practice of asanas and pranayama without considering that these are two limbs of yoga and work together with the others.

Asanas and pranayama evolved over time into the system we know as hatha yoga, as a more comprehensive system was felt to be needed not only to keep the body and energy in better condition but as a physical and vital doorway to the discovery of yoga or the unity of things.

The very word yoga implies *unity*—and discovery of the unity must involve the mind. At first, fragmentation seems to be the experience but all these fragments we call distractions and bubbling thoughts rise and fall in the very same thing—the mind lake. And, there is something that is aware or enables awareness of all this activity.

The practice of hatha yoga seems physical and vital (like breathing) but all activity stems from, is enabled and sustained by the inner intelligence, and it is this intelligence which is beyond personality or ego that the yogi seeks to experience. The physical and mental benefits of hatha yoga are very important but not the most important thing. Without the yoga element, hatha yoga is reduced to a system of exercises—good but not different from other exercises.

The Yoga Element

Yoga is more concerned with 'being' and not satisfied by merely doing. All doing must enable discovery and transformation of being. Being aware of the activity of the mind is itself disentanglement from thought.

In the practice of yoga asanas, we have an opportunity to discover that it is possible to do something with full awareness and without the interference of thought. This is not to say that asanas are some kind of physical activity that do not require thinking, but to suggest that the inner intelligence is perfectly capable of acting—doing the asana intelligently.

Say you are doing pachimotasana (#7 in the illustrations that follow) where you sit on the floor with your legs outstretched and reach out to hold the toes or feet. Once you begin the asana, you stay fully aware and discover that it is the inner intelligence that does the asana, not you. It tells you how far you can go today and to hold—cautioning you that extending yourself may be
unpleasant. This same intelligence within is actively at work within, trying to bring about the flexibility to maintain the posture and to better it. If you are doing the asana intelligently, without *trying* to get into it like the image you’ve seen, you will quickly realize when you can extend yourself further and how long you can hold the posture before a signal is sent and received.

Through asana practice, you directly see the intelligence within, which is beyond the ego, at work. This intelligence is not burdened with your hopes, ambition and preference and you see that all of this is added on by the ego and that there is now a separation between the inner intelligence and the ego. The inner intelligence deals with what actually is—here, the asana you are doing. The ego deals with what it would like, prefer or what it hopes for—that is, thought. The inner intelligence does not respond to thought as it is the ego’s creation and sustained by it. The ego dwells and flourishes in its own abyss or in waves of thought.

You quickly learn that by following the inner intelligence, you discover just how long you can stay in the asana and when you can extend further. There is no struggle at all. Struggle is experienced when you ‘try’ to do it with all your skill, even though the asana seems difficult. The practice of asanas is not about the difficulty of the asana—but about difficulty period. Difficulty is the resistance felt by the interference of the ego with the reality of what actually is or the situation right now.

Through asana, you learn that following the inner intelligence is also self-surrender. The ego gets no play even though you are fully engaged in doing as you are doing intelligently by responding to the inner intelligence instead of the little self or ego. You cannot help but ask yourself why this would not be possible in all the other action in life or life period. Life is a stream of action and response, and if this same inner intelligence is fully empowered, perception and response will flow smoothly.

So, you decide to do an asana and select one, and find that once decided—the inner intelligence works very efficiently and *it* is what acts. The trapeze artist too learns to trust this same inner intelligence, as there would be no way he or she could consciously adjust the body every moment. They become experts not so much at trapeze but at giving themselves wholly to the inner intelligence. The yogi does not seek expertise in the asana but self-mastery through intelligent asana practice where he directly sees the inner intelligence at work, doing the asana, and learns to follow its lead.

**Physical benefits of asana practice**

Some of the physical benefits of specific asanas are listed along with the images that follow. These just come; no need to chase after them or be concerned with things like body sculpting.
Being fully aware of the inner process is mental sculpting—chiseling away the ego by disuse and using the inner intelligence instead. The physical will just happen, let it come.
Suryanamaskar

(Sun Salutations)

This is a good way to start asana practice and it is seen more as exercise than asana as there is constant vigorous movement. Suryanamaskar or sun salutations will exercise the entire system including the cardiovascular and respiratory system. It does not take any special equipment and can be practiced indoors or outdoors.

Routine: One cycle consists of all 12 movements done in one direction, and then reversed or done in the other direction. Start with 8-10 complete sets (which is all movements with the right leg forward first, followed by all movements with the left leg forward next) and work your way to 20 complete sets.

Practice: Start with the right foot forward from posture #3 for these 12, then reverse to have the left foot forward from posture #3 for these 12 again. Together, these 24 movements form one cycle of sun salutations.

Practice - Raja Yoga - Asana and Pranayama
Basic Asanas

The photos are of Yogi Prem Chaitanya - some 60 years ago. A yogi of high caliber, he was an expert in all facets of yoga. His photos bring out the asana perfectly.

1. Padmasana

Sit on the floor with your legs stretched forward.

Hold your right foot, bending the leg at the knee and place the right foot on the left thigh.

Similarly, now hold your left foot, bending the leg at the knee and place the left foot on the right thigh.

Keep the body erect and place your hands between the heels in chinmudra.

**Time, repetition and utility:** As long as possible without moving in japa and meditation. Begin mental japa as soon as you assume the posture; it turns the attention within.

2. Siddhasana

Sit on the floor with your legs stretched forward.

Bend the left leg at the knee and place the heel at the space between the anus and scrotum.

Fold the right leg and place the heel against the pubic bone or just above the genitals.

Keep the body erect and place your hands between the heels in chinmudra.

**Time, repetition and utility:** As long as possible without moving in japa and meditation. Begin mental japa as soon as you assume the posture; it turns the attention within.
Step #1: Sit in vajrasana or on your knees with a folded blanket or soft seat in front of you. Interweave and interlock your fingers and place it on the seat so the arms form a triangle with the locked fingers and forearms. Place the top of your head on the blanket, close to the finger-lock. Raise the body and bring the knees to the chest, toes still touching the ground. (not shown above)

Step #2: Slowly raise the toes from the ground till they can be folded above the thighs.

Step #3: Raise the thighs so the bent legs fall back naturally and the knees are facing up.

Step #4: Straighten the knees so the toes are pointing straight up and the body erect, in one straight line.

Benefits: The king of asanas, sirshasana, has many benefits including improving memory, eyesight, hearing, chronic constipation, preserves vital energy.

Time and repetition: Slowly increase the time from 1 minute to 3 minutes, repeat 2 times.
4. Sarvangasana

Lie on your back and slowly raise the legs.
Lift the hips and legs vertically, resting the elbows on the ground firmly to support the back with both hands.
Raise the legs till they are vertical, toes pointing up.
Press the chin against the chest and hold.

Benefits: Excellent overall toner, it massages the thyroid glands, gives spinal flexibility, promotes healthy blood flow, removes constipation and other stomach disorders and rejuvenates the entire system.

Time and repetition: Slowly increase the time from 1 minute to 3 minutes, repeat 2 times.

5. Matsyasana

First sit in padmasana and slowly lay backwards till you are lying on your back.
Lift the trunk and head, resting the top of the head on the ground by arching the back.
Catch the toes and hold the position.

Benefits: Relieves neck cramps caused by sarvangasana, strengthens the waist, back and neck, opens the larynx and trachea and fills the lungs with a deep supply of fresh air.

Time and repetition: Slowly increase the time from 1 minute to 3 minutes, repeat 2 times.

Note: Should be performed after sarvangasana, especially if you have held it for more than 2 minutes.
6. Halasana

Lie flat on your back, keeping the two hands near the thighs palms down.
Without bending the legs, raise them gradually, keeping the hands on the ground.
Raise the hips and lower back and bring the toes to the ground just beyond the head.
Keep the knees straight and close together.
With the chin against the chest, breathe slowly through your nose.

Benefits: Stretches the muscles of the back, strengthens the abdominal muscles, pulls on the whole spine giving each vertebrae and ligament plenty of fresh blood supply, tones the spinal nerves and rejuvenates the nervous system.

Time and repetition: Slowly increase the time from 1 minute to 3 minutes, repeat 2 times.

7. Pachimotasana

Lie flat on your back with your legs and thighs extended and straight.
Slowly raise your head and chest as if you are rolling forward gradually and bend the trunk forward till you are able to reach and hold onto the toes.
If possible, you can bury your head between your knees.

Benefits: Rouses the gastric fire and makes the breath flow through the sushumna nadi, tones and reduces fat in the abdominal area, tones spleen and liver, increases bowel movements, removes constipation, cures piles, controls diabetes and increases spinal elasticity.

Time and repetition: Slowly increase the time from 1 minute to 3 minutes, repeat 2 times.
8. Mayurasana

Step #1: Kneel as shown above with arms joined or touching each other, resting on the ground palms down and fingers pointed to the feet. Curving the fingers slightly, will offer better balance. Support the body with the forearms and bring the abdomen slowly down against the joint elbows.

Step #2: Stretch the legs and rest the toes on the ground. Inhale and raise both legs together so they are parallel to the floor and the body is in one straight line from the head to the toes.

**Benefits:** Restores stomach disorders, tones the liver, pancreas, stomach and kidneys, strengthens the hand muscles and improves balance.

**Time and repetition:** Slowly increase the time from 5 seconds to 30 seconds, repeat 2 times.

---

9. Bhujangasana

Lie on the floor face down, completely relaxed, arms stretched out before you, palms flat on the floor.

Raising your head and torso, let the spine bend nicely while the rest of the body, from the waist down, touches the ground.

**Benefits:** Tones the deep and superficial muscles of the back, relieves back pain due to prolonged sitting and overwork, tones ovaries and the uterus in ladies.

**Time and repetition:** Slowly increase the time from 30 seconds to 1 minute, repeat 2 times.
10. Salabhasana

Lie on the floor face down, completely relaxed with your hands along the body, palms up. Rest the chin on the ground by raising the head up a little.

Inhale, stiffen the whole body and raise the legs together while keeping the knees together and straight.

Raise the sacrum or lower back a little along with the legs. The weight of the legs will shift to the chest and hands. Hold while keeping the thighs, legs and toes in a straight line.

Benefits: Develops the upper half of the body, tones vertebrae and sacral regions, strengthens all abdominal muscles, relieves constipation and tones the liver, pancreas and kidneys.

Time and repetition: Slowly increase the time from 10 seconds to 45 seconds, repeat 2 times.

11. Dhanurasana

Lie on the floor face down, completely relaxed. Bend the knees to fold the legs over the thighs. Raise the head and chest and hold the ankles with the hands.

Raise the head, body and knees by pulling the legs. The weight of the body will rest on the abdomen.

Keep the spine nicely arched so it resembles a bow. The arms and forearms should be straight and firm and the knees together.

Benefits: Supplements bhujangasana, massages back muscles, energizes digestion, reduces fat and invigorates appetite.

Time and repetition: Slowly increase the time from 30 seconds to 2 minutes, repeat 2 times.
12. Ardhamatsyendrasana

Sit on the floor with your legs stretched forward.
Bending the right leg at the knee, set the heel against the perineum.
Bend the left knee and lifting it with your hands, extend the left foot over the right leg and place it on the ground next to the right knee.
Pass the right hand over the left knee and catch the left foot firmly.
Swing the left hand back and try to hold the left thigh. Give a steady pull to twist the spine and turn towards the left.
Repeat the same process on the right side also.
**Benefits:** Increases spinal elasticity, massages the abdominal organs and tones spinal nerves.
**Time and repetition:** Slowly increase the time from 1 minute to 2 minutes, repeat 2 times on each side.

13. Padahastasana

Standing upright and inhaling, raise your hands over your head.
Exhaling, bend forward till the hands touch the toes and the head touches the knees.
Keep the knees straight and unbent and your arms touching the ears all the while.
In time, you will be able to bury the face between the knees and keep your palms flat on the floor.
**Benefits:** Includes all benefits of pachimotosana, increases height, tones abdomen and overall body, reduces abdomen fat and makes the body lighter.
**Time and repetition:** Slowly increase the time from 1 minute to 2 minutes, repeat 2 times.
14. Savasana

Lie flat on your back with your legs and thighs straight but relaxed.
The heels should be together and toes naturally apart.
Close your eyes and consciously relax the mind and all the muscles of the body. Then, after taking a deep breath and exhaling completely—feel the prana in each part of the body from the toes to the top of the head.
Working one side at a time, start by focusing your attention on the toes, then go on to the calf muscles, knees, and thighs. Now, feel both sides of the lower body relaxing at the same time.
Next, feel the prana in the abdomen, chest, back and buttocks area.
Next, the hands, first working one side at a time from the fingers to the forearms, biceps, and the whole arm. Now, feel both arms relaxing at the same time.
Next, feel the prana in the shoulders, neck, face muscles and the top of the head.
Finally, feel the prana filling the brain with fresh energy and relaxing it completely.
Gently roll from side to side and get up gracefully.

Benefits: Can be done anytime you feel the need for conscious total relaxation.

Time and repetition: Slowly increase the time from 8 minutes to 15 minutes one time.
IV. Pranayama

Prana is life-force, the energy that sustains and animates all life. Pranayama is control of prana through regulation of breath. It is prana that animates breath within and makes the winds blow without. It is also this same prana that makes thought rise to the conscious mind. There are not two or more energies but one energy that manifests differently.

Breath is the external manifestation of prana within and the practice of pranayama makes the movement of prana efficient. Efficient movement of prana through breathing exercises is also experienced as efficiency in the mind where the erratic movement of thought is brought to good order.

The yoga element basics apply here as well in full measure. Once you begin the practice, you notice that many adjustments take place within; retention becomes longer as does exhalation. People generally breath shallow and inhale longer than exhaling. This increases the residual carbon dioxide build-up which makes one feel tired and spent. Once you set about pranayama practice, you will notice the intelligence within restoring the body through prana or life-force which flows through the movement of breath. Here again we find a way to give ourselves to this inner intelligence by not cooperating with the ego which will prompt you to retain for a shorter time and gasp for breath more quickly. This does not mean that you push the envelope and breathe aggressively but recognize the false cry of the ego by seeing that it is possible to retain just a little longer and breathe out a little more fully by seeing directly that it is possible. There is no pressure or violence, the inner intelligence simply assures you that it is possible.

Long distance runners know this secret too well that it is the mind that runs through the body and what is referred to as 'second wind' is what happens when the inner intelligence starts running, bypassing the little ego that would rather be... .

Pranayama must be done very intelligently, just like asana practice as the inner intelligence is awakened and empowered and this inner intelligence—aside from being very efficient—knows how to do what needs to be done, while at the same time rejuvenating the entire system. Efficiency is not just in the doing but in doing without loss and with replenishment. This, the ego just does not know.

There are different types of pranayama but here, we shall be concerned with just one simple pranayama—Swami Sivananda's 'Sukha Purvak Pranayama'. Quite similar to the alternate nostril breathing pranayama, this version does not use time as a measure for inhalation, retention or exhalation but asks that you try to pay attention to retention and exhalation in retaining them for as long as is—with the emphasis on 'as long as...'. This simple pranayama done with full awareness and heart will teach you many things about what is possible while
restoring overall health and well-being and costing nothing at all. There are many other types of pranayama and cleansing techniques in the yoga system that you can use as needed.

**Sukh Purvak Pranayama**

Sit comfortably in padmasana with eyes closed.

Close the right nostril with the right thumb and breath in very slowly through the left nostril.

Keeping the right thumb over the right nostril, close the left nostril with the last three fingers of the same hand and retain the breath 'as long as' you comfortably can.

Releasing the thumb from the right nostril, gently release the breath through it.

Reverse the cycle by first closing the left nostril with the last three fingers of the right hand and breathing in through the left nostril.

Close the right nostril with the right thumb of the same hand and retain the breath 'as long as' you comfortably can.

Release the last three fingers from the left nostril and release the breath through it.

Alternating the cycle is one pranayama.

**Benefits:** All of what we have discussed in the yoga element with asanas apply to pranayama as well. Physically, the body becomes healthier as deeper breathing dispels residual carbon dioxide and one feels increased energy levels. The increased supply of fresh oxygen results in better repair and maintenance and digestion and sleep improve significantly. Mentally, regulation of prana significantly reduces lethargy and restlessness of the mind or tamas and rajas. The mind is in a better state for concentration and meditation.

**Time and repetition:** Start with 10 pranayama cycles and gradually increase the number to 20 cycles and practice twice a day, in the morning and evening.
**Practice Chart**

Padmasana and siddhasana are mainly for japa and meditation. Recommend sitting in them while sitting in your normal activities at home to increase flexibility. Sitting in vajrasana for about 10-15 minutes after your meal helps digestion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>From time</th>
<th>To time</th>
<th>Times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suryanamaskar</strong></td>
<td>8-10 cycles</td>
<td>20 cycles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(More a well-rounded system of exercise, it is recommended before the asana routine)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sirsasana</strong> (You can go longer if inclined)</td>
<td>1 minute</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sarvangasana</strong> (You can go longer if inclined)</td>
<td>1 minutes</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Matsyasana</strong></td>
<td>1 minutes</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Halasana</strong></td>
<td>1 minutes</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pachimotasana</strong></td>
<td>1 minutes</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mayurasana</strong></td>
<td>5 seconds</td>
<td>30 seconds</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bhujangasana</strong></td>
<td>30 seconds</td>
<td>1 minute</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Salabhasana</strong></td>
<td>10 seconds</td>
<td>45 seconds</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dhanurasana</strong></td>
<td>30 seconds</td>
<td>2 minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ardhamatsyendrasana</strong></td>
<td>1 minute</td>
<td>2 minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Padahastasana</strong></td>
<td>1 minute</td>
<td>2 minutes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Savasana</strong></td>
<td>1 complete relaxation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pranayama</strong></td>
<td>10 cycles</td>
<td>20 cycles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Download a Yoga Asana Chart, Suryanamaskar Chart and a video of Asana and Pranayama from www.suryadevananda.org.)