

Postures in Practice – A series of articles on Āsana by Paul Harvey

Part one – Moving into our Bodies with samasthiti

This is the first in a series of articles presenting the core principles for āsana practice as taught to me over many years of personal lessons in India with my teacher TKV Desikachar.

The emphasis on the combination of a practice skilfully adapted to my background and attitude whilst improvised according to my life and situation, is one eminently suited to the starting point for many Western practitioners today.

Unlike the more traditional Indian starting points of my teachers where āsana were taught from childhood, we begin Yoga practice at different ages and certainly with different needs. We may begin from an urge to exercise, or an interest in meditation, or be driven by the need to recover from ill health or to reduce stress.

Alternatively Yoga is one of many strategies we are drawn towards to improve the quality of our lives. Yoga is increasingly being acknowledged as a tool to help make us happier and better able to cope with modern Western life.

All in all a far cry from the more traditional reasons why a young student in India began practising āsana.

This contemporary shift in the starting point, direction and role for our practice implies that there are many approaches which can be considered for today's modern Yoga student. This is reflected in the vast range of styles and emphasis available in Yoga classes today.

Whilst most certainly focus on āsana, the student faces almost a bewildering array of choices from dynamic to static, from energetic to relaxing, with music without music, from long relaxations, to hot house, to heartwork, from large groups all doing the same postures, to groups where each student pursues a different practice aim.

Whilst many may have a validity and a place with Modern Postural Yoga in the West today, the students task is to consider what is most appropriate for them and their needs. Even here we may need to reflect on our ambitions and possible conflict between what we can do and what we should do.

For example a student with a lithe body and long neck may well be able to do a posture like shoulder stand with apparent ease. However whether they should do it is different issue and needs careful reflection from both a short term benefit and a long term risk viewpoint. Equally the benefit in one area such as at a systemic level may be outweighed by the accumulative risk at a structural level.

So how to proceed? This is where we have the principle of vinyāsa krama or the intelligent sequencing of Yoga āsana according to the starting point, needs and goals of the student.

The purpose of this series of articles is twofold. Firstly to present a brief introduction to the primary principles which underpin and inform āsana practice as taught to me by TKV Desikachar and secondly to present a series of key postures within what could be seen as a core practice of some of the basic āsana for a beginner student.

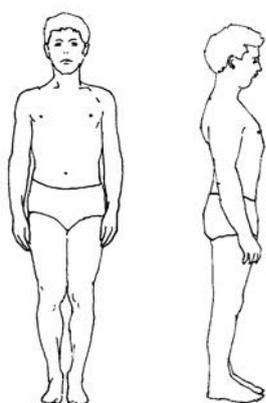
The introduction for each article will focus on one aspect of practice planning and to complement that we will present and examine each of the āsana in depth within the core practice and suggest an option for its use from three viewpoints:

- How to deepen the quality of our attention in the āsana in focus
- How to vary its use to bring a different feeling and finally
- How to adapt it for different situations or limitations.

Obviously in an article such as this we can only give an example or two to touch on these areas as the best place to explore this in depth is within a live teaching situation

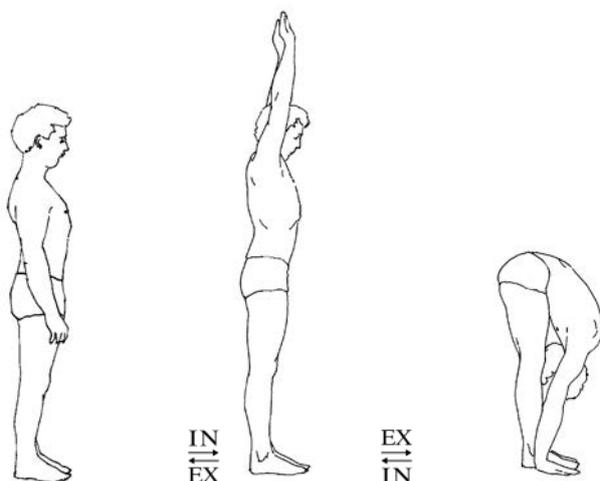
This particular article will introduce the first posture that a healthy person would learn to start their āsana practice with.

This posture is known in this tradition as samasthiti or standing with awareness.

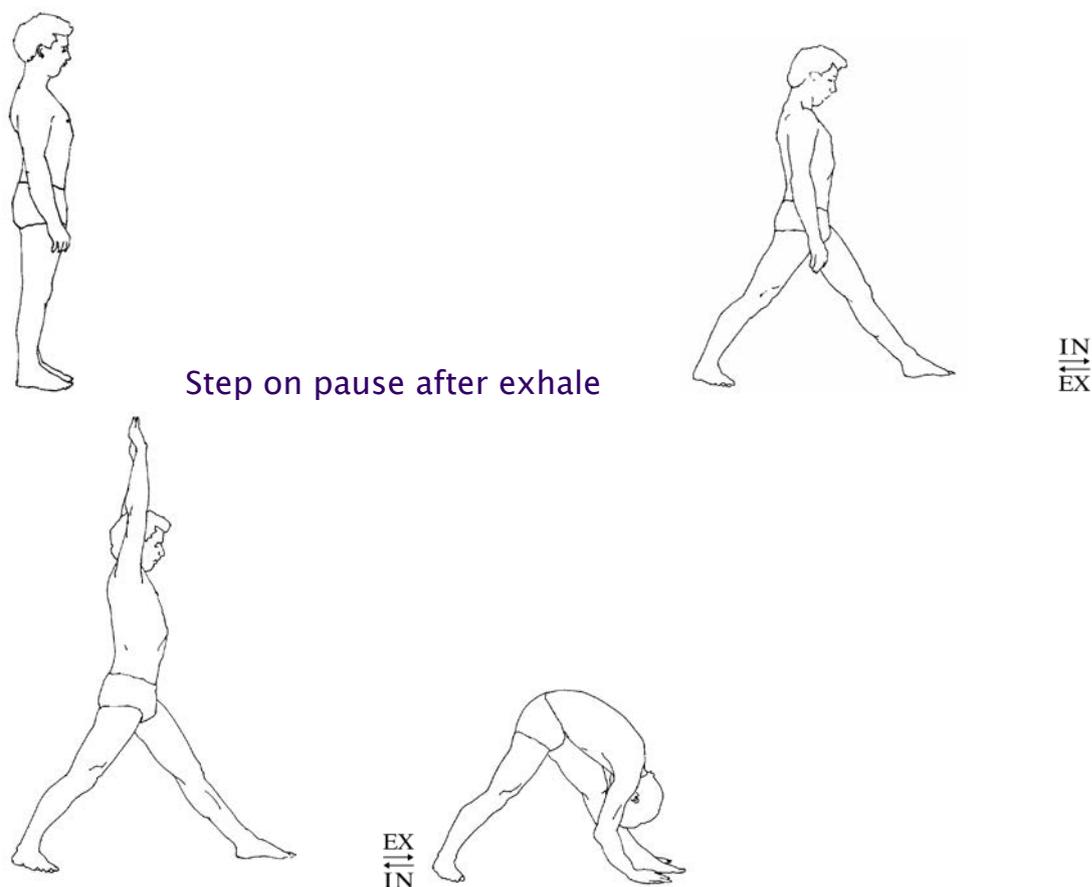


As such its use marks a reference point for all standing āsana as well as being how we begin the standing posture part of or āsana practice. This is because any standing posture both begins from and ends with samasthiti. So rather than thinking the posture begins when we are in the final phase or final form we need to compare it to something like cooking.

The meal begins from the moment we begin to get out the chopping board and wash the vegetables to prepare them for cooking. Equally after the food is cooked and eaten we return to the starting point by washing up and returning the chopping board to its starting point.



So it is with samasthiti as both a starting point and completion point for any standing āsana. Within this we need to also reflect on what part of any action we are more likely to be more casual around, the approach, the crown or the completion? Generally it is the ending, thus samasthiti is important to help sustain a quality of attention after the main pose is completed.

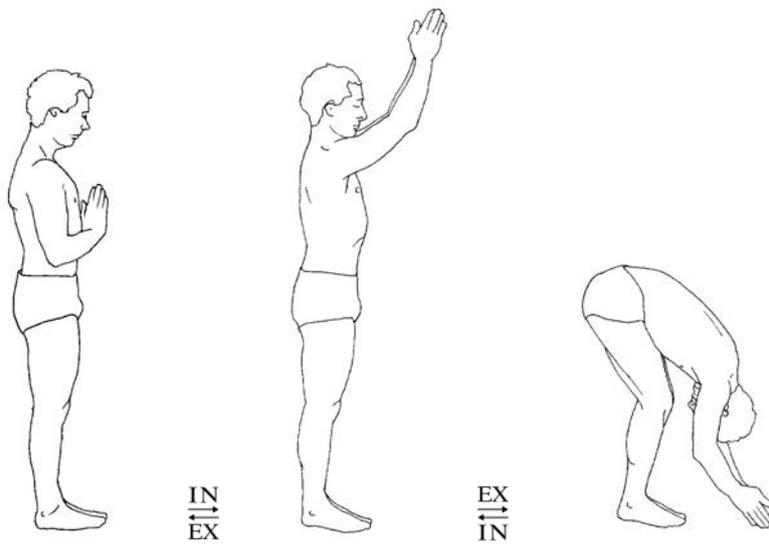


The value of samasthiti is further emphasised here in that it provides a place to reflect on the effect of the āsana it has led us into and out of. Sometimes we are so involved with the doing of the core of the āsana that we do not reflect enough on its effect.

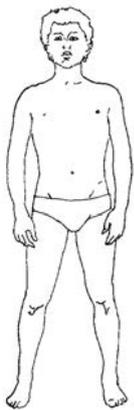
Samasthiti offers just this place and space to experience the after taste or after effect. It is here that often the discoveries are tasted or at least we can note what could be useful to remember for next time we use it.

Thus as well as being a posture in its own right samasthiti offers an important role for any āsana as a starting or focus point as well as a returning or experience point following its completion.

The posture itself can be used in different forms to signify a different attitude to the āsana element of our practice. For example we may wish to work at a standing forward bend incorporating a specific hand mudrā or gesture to facilitate a certain feeling within the pose.



Or we may have a need where we have to respect certain limitations in movement or problems that necessitate working in a more healing way and the starting point reflects this either through the position of the legs where stability may be an issue or there is a need not to be too tight in the abdominal area.



Or in contrast we may be wishing to work incorporating stronger techniques such as bandha from the starting point of our āsana practice. Here we would be using what is known as jālandhara bandha or chin lock within samasthiti to intensify the effect of this and the following āsana.



Furthermore as samasthiti is often the first āsana we begin with we often find ourselves not yet present in the practice. One of the roles for the posture is to attune the student from being outside their mat to being inside their mat by helping us turn our attention away from the daily and often important externals such as relationships, family, work, sleep, domestics, hobbies, that have so often preceded the practice space.

Even distractions are part of the picture for samasthiti in that we can have resistance to getting on the mat to the point where we look for other things to do such as I must answer that email now or even anticipate things that might happen such as somebody might message me.

So what could be some of the key points to help in bringing the necessary atunement away from the external towards the here and now of my life and where I find myself standing today.

Here samasthiti is a point of return. Yoga Practice is a return to our inner life and in the spirit of Yoga Sūtra Chapter One verse 33 it might be helpful to reflect on how we can step onto our mat and come into samasthiti:

“Cultivating a feeling of Maitrī or friendliness towards our own attempts, let alone others demands, to distract ourselves.

Cultivating a feeling of Karuṇā or compassion towards our bodies and minds, whatever state we find them in.

Cultivating a feeling of Muditā or looking for the positive spot in ourselves and what we can do well and now, rather than what we can't do well or now.

Cultivating a feeling of Upekṣā or holding distance from the self-deprecation that can so often accompany our attempts to improve the quality of our inner life and old responses to inner tensions and past memories.”

So to summarise this first article, its role is not to focus on technical detail or top tips for attention. There are many good and useful Āsana books available with a myriad of external and internal postural pointers.

Plus you cannot beat the value of a good teachers eye, ear and voice to offer a mirror that is more reflective than our own sight, at least in the beginning.

For example when we first stand in samasthiti look at where our feet are from the inside rather than using the eyesight. Surely after all these years we know where are feet are? Learning to use the inner eye to feel where we are and then visually checking is a step towards internalising the practices of Yoga.

Equally we might prefer the metaphor of where do I find myself standing today rather than the technical emphasis which may in fact take you away from the emotional body and its message and needs.

Whichever option you adopt let it be in the spirit of the Yoga Sūtra C1 v2:

“Yoga is the containment of movement in the psyche.”

In the next article we will explore Tādāsana or the elevation of the arms and heels from samasthiti.

Paul Harvey updated 2015

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