

Finding your starting point within Āsana to set a direction and route towards a goal...



"In order to know where we are going to,
we must first know where we are coming from."

Often in the Āsana aspect of Yoga practice, whether within our personal practice or a teaching environment, the student is directed towards a goal.

This may be to do with a physical or structural foci such as the:

- Basic Performance of the Āsana
- Continuing Improvement of the Āsana
- Specific Intensification of the Āsana
- Introducing Stay into the Āsana

However, the common factor within all of these options is that they are goal-based.

This is fine as a general principle however as in any area of our lives, setting off towards any goal requires that we also have a clear idea of our starting point. For example, if I am wanting to travel to London I need to know whether I am starting from Birmingham or Brighton in order to set a direction and distance to navigate from. So it is with Āsana.

This notion of establishing the starting point in terms of setting goals and establishing the number of steps, as in Vinyāsa Krama, was one of the fundamental principles within any aspect of practice taught to me by Desikachar. It is also an inherent factor within the notion of the Viniyoga or application of Āsana, in that how can we make and apply an intelligent arrangement without knowing both where the student is starting from as well as going towards.

A simple demonstration of this teaching is a Vinyāsa Krama to help in determining basic structural restrictions within the student's body. In this instance, the steps are towards determining the degrees of freedom or restriction within the movement of the arms and shoulders within the upper body.

In this example, there are a number of steps which integrate 15 points of attention or Bhāvana to guide our performance of the Āsana and evaluation of our starting point.

The starting point is to lie on our backs with the knees bent and feet on the ground. Ensure that all of the feet are in contact with the ground, so as to ensure we can experience that the lower back is fully touching the floor.



From there we are going to raise and lower the arms linking the opening and closing movements of the breath to the arms. Importantly the intention here is to bring all of the arms onto the ground beyond the head, without losing the contact between the lower back and the ground.



A simple enough movement, however, the following series of steps with a specific Bhāvana or foci can be incorporated to help us establish where we are coming from, as well as going towards in terms of the unique matrix that is our personal Annamaya Saṃskāra.

1. Start by pressing down with the feet to tilt the pelvis and place the lumbar spine onto the floor. This position with the lower back grounded onto the floor is to be maintained throughout this entire process. This aspect of grounding the lower back within different contexts of practice supports the placing of the Mūla in Āsana practice.

Now raise the arms overhead to the ground behind you and lower them back alongside the trunk, using the breath to guide the movement by raising and lowering on the inhale and exhale, whilst keeping the lower back firmly embedded on the ground.

2. The second step in this Vinyāsa Krama is to repeat this process, whilst keeping the lower back on the ground and bring the elbows clearly and firmly onto the ground behind the head. This may already mean that the shoulders may need to be released by bending the elbows and increasing the distance between the hands on the ground behind the head.

3. The third step is to repeat this process with keeping the lower back on the ground whilst placing the elbows and the backs of the wrists clearly and firmly onto the ground behind the head. This may also mean that the shoulders may need to be further released by bending the elbows more and further increasing the distance between the hands on the ground behind the head.

4. The fourth step is to repeat this process by keeping the lower back on the ground whilst placing the elbows, the backs of the wrists and all ten fingernails clearly and firmly onto the ground behind the head. This may also mean that the shoulders may need to be even further released by bending the elbows and thus increasing the distance between the hands on the ground behind the head.

So, to summarise these 15 points of reference in this Vinyāsa Krama - Lower back, both elbows, both backs of the wrists and all ten fingernails.

The outcome is that we have established a true starting point for the arms and shoulders and their relationship to mobility in the upper back as a reference for any movement within any Āsana whether standing, seated, supine lying or prone backbends.

This outcome may be a surprise as many students do not prioritise grounding all of the arms, in terms of elbows, wrists and fingernails, behind the head or unconsciously use an increased arching of the lower back to compensate for limitations in movement in the shoulders.

Plus, this surprise may mean that, given today's structural starting points for many students in terms of age, everyday postural patterns and general condition of the body, the elbows will be very bent and the hands very spread apart in order to realise this final position. Some students may even end up with their arms virtually at right angles to the trunk in order to ground all the 15 points mentioned.

However, without realising clearly our starting point, our effectiveness and progress within other Āsana will be limited, or it may even mean that we are working in a compensatory way by overusing or underusing other parts of the body.

In this example to as if, bypass the limitations in our shoulder mobility and not discover its true range of movement. Thus, from that, its potential impact on the movement within the upper back, shoulder girdle and upper chest. In other words, the area of the Prāṇa Sthāna.

**"The more you can experience the work in the upper spine,
the more you can work the inhale in the Prāṇa Sthāna.
The more you can work the inhale in the Prāṇa Sthāna,
the more you can experience the work in the upper spine."**