

Introducing Uḍḍīyana Bandha within an Āsana practice....

A short end of morning study 25' pre-lunch practice from the second day of three day Practitioner Training Programme Module first year group some years ago. Here the primary Bhāvana or theme was to offer a concise practice to experientially explore previous theoretical teachings around Bandha and the form of Taḍāka Mudrā, with added examples for the introductory application of Uḍḍīyana Bandha within Āsana.

Here the practice began with work in Supta Samasthiti in order to lengthen the breath using Ujjāyī as a base to using Supta Tāḍāsana to introduce the Bāhya Kumbhaka as a preliminary for Uḍḍīyana Bandha. Then Taḍāka Mudrā is introduced, firstly in a dynamic form with a return to base Vinyāsa and then intensified with the static form incorporating successive Uḍḍīyana Bandha. Here it might be helpful to emphasise that according to Krishnamacharya, Uḍḍīyana Bandha is applied within the Bāhya Kumbhaka.

However given the inevitable mix of gender, age, physical abilities and personal situations within any group format teaching class, the key Āsana are offered with a choice of either sustaining the use of the Bāhya Kumbhaka or intensifying them through the integration of Uḍḍīyana Bandha into this practice plan. However all students had experience with the use of breathing ratios and were familiar with the chosen Āsana.

From here the practice transited from lying Āsana to kneeling Āsana via the use of a variation of Cakravakāsana, with the integration of either sustaining the use of the Bāhya Kumbhaka, or the added intensification of further work with Uḍḍīyana Bandha. Cakravakāsana is also chosen as the starting point in the Vinyāsa Krama for accessing Adho Mukha Śvan Āsana, rather than the more often recognised approach of jumping from such as Uttānāsana, more usually reserved for the Sṛṣṭi Krama life stage Āsana practice.

Utilising Cakravakāsana to move into Adho Mukha Śvan Āsana, the students stayed for 3 breaths with a solid Ujjāyī and repeated this sequence two times for a total stay of 6 breaths. Here again the stay in this particular key Āsana within the crown of the practice, is with the integration of either sustaining the use of the Bāhya Kumbhaka, or the added intensification of further work with Uḍḍīyana Bandha. This 6 breath stay was followed by settling and resting within the kneeling grouping of Āsana using Vajrāsana.

From here the concluding part or Uttara Aṅga phase of the practice continued with Vajrāsana facilitating a transitional link towards, in this particular situation, utilising standing Āsana within a concluding role. Firstly we have Uttānāsana being repeated 6 times, here with the addition of a light Bāhya Kumbhaka as part of the stepping down from the more intensive work with the Kumbhaka and where chosen, Uḍḍīyana Bandha.

The work with standing Āsana continued with the inclusion of Vīrabhadrāsana, in this practice being utilised within a compensatory role. It was applied within a mix of dynamic and static in that the trunk and legs are relatively fixed, whilst the movement is within the arms only. Thus it is a stay of 6 breaths each side, whilst moving the arms only. From here the practice concludes with kneeling and a dynamic version Cakravakāsana starting from a raised Vajrāsana and moving in and out of Adho Mukha Cakravakāsana 6 times.

At this point in the practice, as an aspect of the concluding process, the use of chanting was collectively synchronised by the group into the kneeling forward bend. Here each forward movement integrated the phrase Śāntiśśāntiśśāntiḥ into the exhale. The notational tones or Svāra used here are illustrated in the PDF version of the practice accompanying this post. This was followed by settling and resting within Vajrāsana as the final Āsana before transiting straight from the practice into a group lunch.

Looking at this practice outside of this particular context may also raise questions for those familiar with some of the now generalised practice planning tenets popularised from the teachings of Desikachar. For example why employ an Āsana grouping sequence moving from lying to kneeling to standing to kneeling? Why use standing Āsana in the Uttara Āṅga phase of the practice? What is the role of a Pūrvatāna Āsana such as Vīrabhadrāsana in this phase? What is the role of chanting within this practice?

For all of which there can be a response within which it can be helpful to consider the three important aspects of the journey from the starting point for the group, through the core aims of the practice, through to the relationship of the conclusion to the following activity. In this last context I was taught that the most important aspect is the concluding phase, as well as being the aspect we are most likely to cut corners or not invest enough in anticipation of the delayed effects of the practice amidst the more immediate experiences.

For example the notion of moving from lying to kneeling to standing to kneeling in consideration of a mornings work of seated study and the immediacy of the post-practice activity around eating lunch and assorted post lunch activities. Choosing to use Uttānāsana and long range dynamic movement to facilitate a freedom in the body, following the more constricted abdominal focus or limited range of movement in the lying and kneeling Āsana. The employment of a light Bāhya Kumbhaka to facilitate a graduated transition from the previous intensity of the work on the Bāhya Kumbhaka and with Uḍḍīyana Bandha.

A further consideration is the role of a Pūrvatāna Āsana, here illustrated by the choice of Vīrabhadrāsana as a Pratikriyā Āsana to help compensate the effect of the accumulative efforts around sustained abdominal contractions. A further role to consider is the potential for Vīrabhadrāsana to mildly diffuse the accumulative intensification of Agni arising from the work with either or both the Bāhya Kumbhaka and Uḍḍīyana Bandha.

Why would one wish to diffuse an intensified Agni? In the sense that the practice could overly stimulate the digestive fire in that it is already heightened by it being the middle of the day and is usually anticipating lunch. The possibility here then is that the conjunction of time of day and the intensity of the practice can overstimulate Agni and this can result in a digestive fire that feels insatiable. The outcome can be that we can be drawn to overeat without realising, as the system seeks to assuage its flame.

Here it can also be helpful to consider that generally the techniques within Haṭha Yoga aim at intensifying Agni and in this respect so do Bāhya Kumbhaka and Uḍḍīyana Bandha. Hence one role within the last kneeling forward movement is the choice of a chant that can support a softening of Agni. Amidst its other roles are it being a structural Pratikriyā Āsana to Vīrabhadrāsana, or acting as a tapering down movement to Vajrāsana, or as a transition from silence to sound, or inner to outer in anticipation of group interaction.

I would again emphasise that this is an example of a unique situation that existed at that moment and thus reflects an expression of a study point or the students group dynamic as a need at that moment. Yet within this caveat, this example of a short but intensive practice, whilst not to be taken as a fixed template, also reflects the richness and multifarious possibilities in how the principles in the viniyoga of Yoga can be expressed as learning and experiential tools within a myriad of situations and personalities.

If there is a sketch quality in the PDF copy it is because these practices were not preplanned and were being notated as they unfolded whilst teaching the group. This also meant I could photocopy them as the practice concluded so copies were immediately available for reflection, reference and discussion.