

The Aṣṭāṅga Āsana or the eight limbs of Āsana Planning and Practice



Āsana practice also implies as well as practicing, we need to know something about the Āsana we are going to work with as we introduce, persevere and develop and especially personalise our practice. Hence we have to both practice but also have some theoretical background in order to context an Āsana in itself and in relationship to both other Āsana and to Yoga.

Thus, guided studies through all the aspects involved in Āsana practice and teaching within the field of Āsana involved firstly, as an adjunct to embracing a personal practice, getting to know one's tools in terms of what. In other words, how to use them without any particular consideration of who, or even why.

This learning into what are the tools we use in Yoga practice and how we learn to apply them on a personal basis, as a novice musician might with regard to their art, were essential first steps. These steps into what and how also preceded learning on how to apply these tools as a Yoga teacher. Even here though, should we be interested in imparting Yoga to others, is it to a person or group wishing to explore and learn the principles as well as the practice?

In other words, being involved with a student wanting to learn Yoga for Yoga, rather than the more usual demand of coming to Yoga for X, Y or Z. The first aspect within this approach to Yoga as Yoga is study around the definition, meaning and context of Āsana as a primary tool. This first step encompasses the concepts of Nāma, Rūpa and Lakṣaṇa or what is the name, form and characteristics of the Āsana we wish to engage with.

Nāma or Name

Firstly we have the Nāma or name. Each Āsana has a name, though within the different threads of transmission these names are not always the same. Plus the development of Āsana is an ongoing process with new forms appearing throughout the Hatha Yoga historical timeline.

These names range from that of animals, plants or minerals, to sages or mythological heroes or aspects of nature, to geometric form or man-made objects.

Rūpa or Form

However behind the individuality of the [Nāma](#) or name lies the concept of [Rūpa](#) or the form. Here I was taught each [Āsana](#) had a core form that was defined according to certain principles known as [Śikṣaṇa Krama](#).

*"Śikṣaṇa Krama - do something perfectly or correctly.
Anything is taught to achieve perfection in the practice
of Āsana and Prāṇāyāma. In other words teaching children
and healthy people where you can take risks with no problems."
- TKV Desikachar 1983*

This concept of [Śikṣaṇa Krama](#) can be seen within the work of students of Krishnamacharya and is a theoretical reference point from which this ideal of [Āsana](#) was then considered in relation to the individual student's needs, interest and especially starting point.

These considerations can mean the practice is modified through the concepts of [Rakṣaṇa Krama](#) where the priorities are protection and preservation in order to promote a continuity in levels such as maintaining health or lifestyle stability, or [Cikitsā Krama](#) where the priority is healing and recovery.

However, the starting point for a theoretical consideration and study of the performance potentiality of [Āsana](#) was always from the [Śikṣaṇa Krama](#) perspective.

Lakṣaṇa or Characteristics

The third aspect in the study of the definition, meaning and context of [Āsana](#) was that of [Lakṣaṇa](#) or characteristics. As well as name and form an [Āsana](#) had certain essential qualities. A study of [Āsana](#) needs to consider how these characteristics can both influence the potential effect of a particular [Āsana](#) or be modified to either intensify or pacify its essential qualities.

Thus, [Āsana](#) practice starts with a need to know something about the [Āsana](#) we are going to work with as we introduce them into our lives and persevere with learning how to develop their use. This step leads on to how to creatively personalise our practice as we encounter the benefits and obstacles involved in integrating our relationship with the art of [Āsana](#).

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Hence we have to practice, but also have some theoretical background in order to context an [Āsana](#) in itself and especially in relation to other [Āsana](#). This also means we need to learn how to context [Āsana](#) not only in relation to other [Āsana](#) but also in relation to and in terms of practice through its ancillary tools.

The [Astāṅga Āsana](#) or the eight limbs of [Āsana](#) Planning and Practice are the formula for constructing a skilful and place, time and lifestyle appropriate [Āsana](#) practice. These, fall into approximately eight themes, that of:

- [Nāma, Rūpa](#) and [Lakṣaṇa](#) - [Āsana](#) has a name, form and characteristics
- Core concept - Definition, meaning and context of [Āsana](#)
- [Vinyāsa Krama](#) - [Āsana](#) are related within groups and categories and arranged into intelligent sequences.
- Core concept – Collecting [Āsana](#) together
- [Pratikriyāsana](#) - How transitions and counterpostures are integrated into the practice
- Core concept - Sustaining the body, breath, mind flow
- [Prāna-Apāna Sthāna](#) - The purpose and direction of the [breath](#) in [Āsana](#)
- Core concept - Where the focus is within and without
- [Rakta Calana](#) and [Śarīra Śodhana](#) - How movement or stay are used in [Āsana](#)
- Core concept - Circulation and purification within dynamic and static
- Variation and Modification - The intensification and adaptation of [Āsana](#) practice
- Core concept - Improvisation as change or necessity
- [Bṛmhaṇa Kriyā](#) and [Laṅghana Kriyā](#) - Linking [Āsana](#) together energetically and psychologically
- Core concept - Connecting [Āsana](#) together as expansion or contraction
- The place of [Darśana](#) - Observation within [Āsana](#) practice
– Core concept – learning to look through [spine](#), [breath](#) and [interest](#)

All of this learning was embedded before adding direction towards others guided by these essential skills, whether the ancillary components of applying Yoga for [Support or Protection](#) within everyday life, or Yoga for those with [therapeutic](#) needs driving their requests and expectations from it.

These considerations can mean the practice is [applied](#) through the concepts of [Rakṣaṇa Krama](#) where the priorities are protection and preservation in order to promote a continuity in levels such as maintaining health or lifestyle stability, or [Cikitsā Krama](#) where the priority is healing and recovery.

Of course how much we pass onto others of these teachings depends on whether a person's relationship with Yoga is shaped by whether they are coming towards Yoga as in learning Yoga for Yoga as in [Śikṣaṇa Krama](#), or wanting Yoga to take them away from something as in [Rakṣaṇa Krama](#) or [Cikitsā Krama](#). Though we cannot easily predict how the latter may lead to the former, or even vice versa.