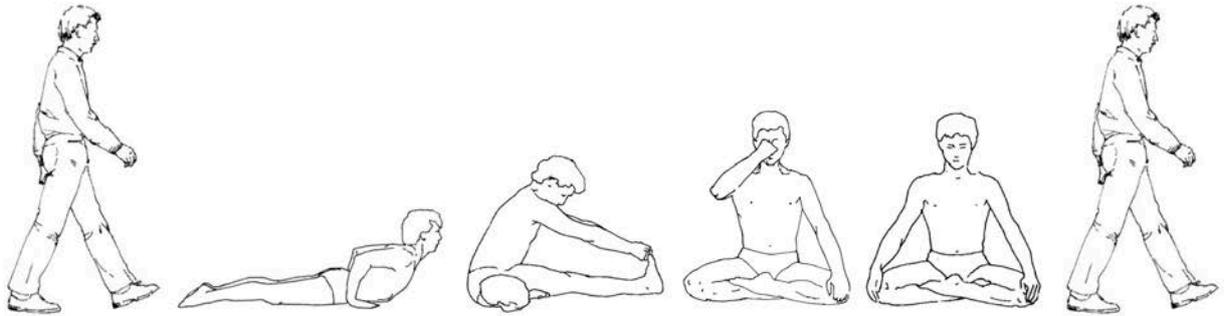


The Viniyoga of Āsana -
Summary of posts – Parts 1 - 5
- Extended in 2020 from my 121 study notes
with TKV Desikachar during April 1980



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1. The Definition of Āsana according to Haṭha and Rāja Yoga



HATĤHA PRADĪPIKĀ Chapter One verse 17

haṭhasya prathama-aṅgatvād-āsanam pūrvam-ucyate |

kuryāt-tad-āsanam sthairyam-ārogyam cāṅga-lāghvam ||

Āsana, being the initial limb of Haṭha, is spoken of first.

Āsana brings about steadiness, improved health and lightness of limb.

For me, still to this day, one of the simplest, direct and most succinct definitions on the purpose of Āsana within the processes and practices of Haṭha Yoga, is the definition offered in the Haṭha Pradīpikā Chapter One verse 17.

It is a definition valid for any situation, discussion or presentation, or as a response to questions from any background, or level of interest around why we practice Āsana.

It can also be a springboard to linking physiological qualities, such as the relationship of Agni, to the energetic qualities of health and lightness of limb. Or drawing from the Jyotsnā, a commentary on the Haṭha Pradīpikā by Brahmānada, as that explores psychological qualities such as the relationship of the Guṇa, Rajas, to mental qualities such as steadiness.

YOGA SŪTRA Chapter Two verse 46

sthira-sukham-āsanam ||

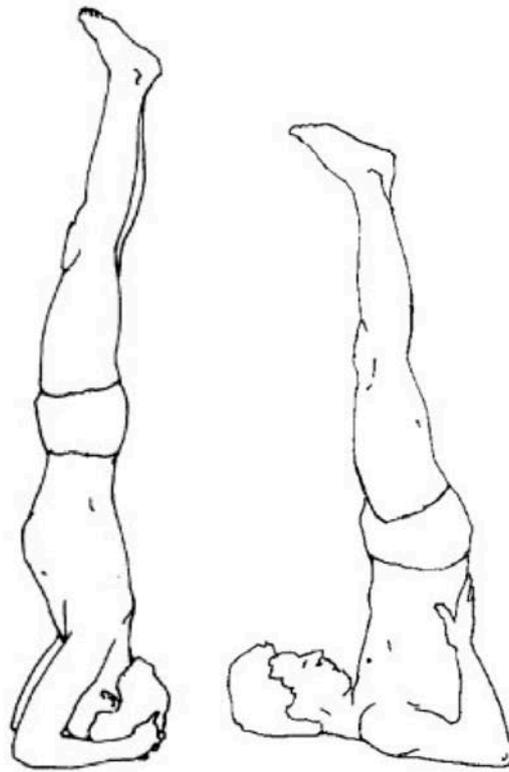
Steady and Comfortable is Āsana

Āsana, according to Chapter Two verse 46, needs to correlate the two qualities of steady attentiveness and spacious clarity. However, we are offered qualities that are actually the fruits or outcome of the guidelines in the next verse. Hence this verse is a definition, but one that arises as an outcome of the attitude around the way we go about exploring Āsana. Although it could be added that this definition also relates to the direction of one's Āsana practice as a whole.

The experience known as Sthira Sukham Āsanam, is described in Yoga Sūtra Chapter Two verse 46. It arises as a fruit of Yoga Sūtra Chapter Two verse 47, from melding the mastery of outer stillness in the world, described as Prayatna Śāithilya, or relaxation of continued effort; with the mystery of inner openness to the beyond, described as AnantaSamāpatti, or unity in the infinite.

The next post will be around the many approaches to Āsana practice.

2. There are Many Approaches to Āsana Practice



To consider this aspect we need to look at different approaches to Āsana practice using as examples the viewpoints of different schools of practice to what are seen by many as the two primary 'classical' Āsana.

For example:

- If you want to use Śīrṣāsana and Sarvāṅgāsana you just go ahead and use them.
- You must master all the standing Āsana before you use Śīrṣāsana and Sarvāṅgāsana.
- You must build up to use Śīrṣāsana and Sarvāṅgāsana at the end of the practice as the 'climax' of your efforts.
- You must start with Śīrṣāsana and Sarvāṅgāsana with the practice leading towards standing Āsana.
- You must always use Sūrya Namaskāram before you use Śīrṣāsana and Sarvāṅgāsana.
- You must be able to do all the Pratikriyā Āsana and the Vinyāsa Krama before attempting Śīrṣāsana and Sarvāṅgāsana.

From these examples we are led to the belief that we must respect that there are various schools of thought around the principles of practice of Āsana.

However, within the teaching convention of Desikachar we can also find his view on what he considers as an appropriate approach to the teaching of these two primary Āsana. In that when we teach Śīrṣāsana, we first teach the preparation, then we teach the Pratikriyā Āsana, namely Sarvāṅgāsana, which in itself is a major pose that demands its own Pratikriyā Āsana, namely Bhujāṅgāsana.

This follows a core principle in the teachings of Vinyāsa Krama. In that the Pratikriyā for a particular Āsana needs to be mastered before that particular Āsana is attempted. So here, if we want to teach Sarvāṅgāsana, because it may have a specific potential for the particular student, then we teach the Pratikriyā Āsana Bhujāṅgāsana first.

So the student first works around Bhujāṅgāsana within their personal practice and the information that arises guides the teacher as to their readiness for Sarvāṅgāsana. The information arising from observing how the student practices Bhujāṅgāsana will also guide the teacher as to the appropriateness of Sarvāṅgāsana.

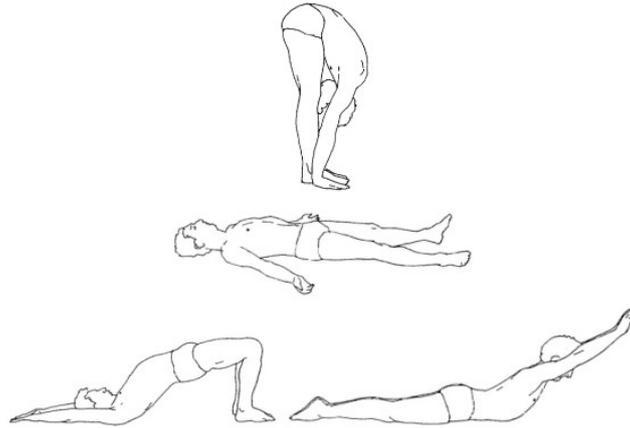
This is another core principle in appreciating that can is not the same as should. In other words just because the student can do the Āsana, it doesn't automatically mean they should do the Āsana. As he has explained, it is all very systematic in that planning means to go gradually, to prepare and then to compensate.

Accordingly, Desikachar taught me five questions that need to be 'posed', for or to any student wishing to practice Śīrṣāsana or Sarvāṅgāsana, or even for and to any teacher wishing to teach Śīrṣāsana or Sarvāṅgāsana, whatever the situation.

1. Who is going to practice them?
2. Why do they wish to use them?
3. When are they going to practice them?
4. How are they going to get in and out of them?
5. What do they need to have done to verify their capability?

The next post will raise questions around the principles of Āsana practice.

3. The Principles used in Constructing an Āsana Practice



So how have the various schools of Yoga come to ideas of using rest, preparation, counterpose, etc as planning principles in the practice of Āsana?

Also if we have certain principles underpinning how we work, how do we apply them to students already set in a particular mode of Āsana practice?

For example:

- Perhaps if they have a physical problem then you have something to work with. However you need to be tactful about pointing such things out, maybe waiting.
- Otherwise you can try to meet them halfway i.e. adding a couple of things to their practice they know and a couple they don't.

If they have been practising in this way for several years what does it matter if it takes several months to influence their Āsana practice. We must consider changes within what is acceptable to each and everybody as basic principles of Āsana practice.

Though in terms of Yoga practice within adult lifestyles the priorities need to be based as much, if not more, around how they practice, rather than what they practice.

For example:

When less Āsana time available than they would like, rather than coping with a more cramped than usual daily mindset, we can consider reducing the number of Āsana the student is used to, or reducing the number of repetitions, or perhaps the length of the stays.

Or, we can even considering lengthening the breath, thus again using fewer Āsana, but all with a longer breath than usual. Here the Bhāvana could be to observe the effect of a more spacious than usual Āsana breathing within the students more usual Āsana.

Thus, we can think of approaching a refresh of the student's relationship with their practice through progressively slowing the patterning of their breathing. To do this a student has to reconsider their practice, not in terms of what we do with their body, but what they do with the breath within their body.

All, whilst remembering within our considerations and choices, that the longer term purpose of varying the forms or numbers of Āsana is to facilitate access to the overall function of Āsana. In other words purposeful change rather than changeless purpose.

The next post will consider the direction of one's Āsana practice.

4. Considerations around the Direction of Āsana Practice



As well as considering what is acceptable to each and every body as basic principles of Āsana practice, we must consider the direction of one's Āsana practice.

For example:

- Where are we starting from in terms of practice as a process?
- Where are we going to in terms of practice as a process?
- Is this process of potential change working with Immediate needs in mind?
- Is this process of potential change working with long term needs in mind?
- Is this process of potential change trying to integrate both Immediate needs and long term needs?

So what is Yoga practice as a process? Practice as a process is consideration of all the factors that surround the establishing of a home practice.

For example this can be:

- The time of the day
- Energy levels at the time of practice
- What the student would be stepping away from in order to engage in practice
- What follows the practice in terms of activity or life demands
- Differences in gender and impact on body rhythms
- Differences in age and impact on body rhythms

To name but a few aspects of practice as a process.

In addition to these factors we must also consider:

The starting point or what has happened before the Āsana practice? In other words, does the intended process of change through Āsana integrate what has happened before?

This notion of establishing the starting point in terms of setting goals and establishing the number of steps 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 of Āsana, in that how can we make and apply intelligent choices without knowing both where the student is starting from as well as going towards.

So, we also need to consider the finishing point or what will happen after the Āsana practice? In other words, does the intended process of change through Āsana integrate what will happen after the practice?

Furthermore there are additional considerations if teaching Āsana within group situations:

- Given the range of students in a group class there will be more potential differences in what has happened before the Āsana practice.
- Given the range of students in a group class there will be more potential differences in what will happen after the Āsana practice.

Hence the maxim from Krishnamacharya around the concept of the Viniyoga of Yoga, in that the Āsana practice should be considered in terms of both the content of the practice and the process that surrounds the circumstances within which the student lives and breathes. Thus the importance of adapting the Āsana practice to the student rather than adapting the student to the Āsana practice.

This maxim also emphasises the differences in potentials between group class and individual teaching environments. The teaching of students within a 1:1 environment optimises the possibilities in meeting their directional and practice needs.

In other words, how we develop the breadth and depth of the content of a student's personal Yoga practice is inevitably and continually framed within the diorama of life's hue and change. Hence, the premise that for Krishnamacharya and Desikachar, Yoga practice as a process needs to precede Yoga practice as content.

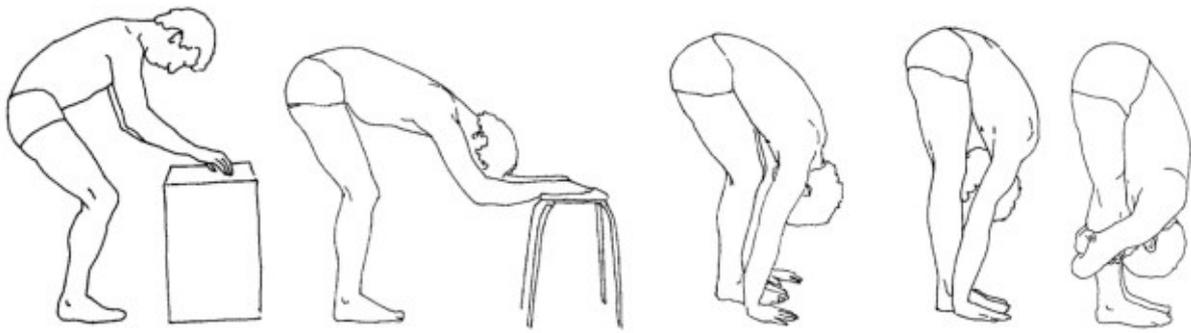
For example in considering:

- Immediate needs
- Long term needs
- What has happened before the Āsana practice
- What will happen after the Āsana practice

Thus, sometimes the Vinyāsa Krama, or special placing of the steps from, is more important than the steps to. At other times the Vinyāsa Krama, or special placing of the steps to, is more important than the steps from. In our life as well as our practice.

The next post will consider the common points amidst the variables around students and their Āsana practice.

5. What are the Common Points within the Variables in Āsana Practice



If we look at all the variables around Āsana practice we can find some similarities between various individuals.

For example:

- The variable must accept and include a persons previous training
- We must respect where a person is coming or starting from
- It is better to consider the immediate situation rather than the long term
- We must respect the after effect of the Āsana practice
- We must respect the after action to come
- We must respect the travel from A to Z or Upāya
- Z seems to vary much more than A, i.e.
- Practice in the morning – generally less variables
- Practice in the evening – more subject to the days effects and different lifestyles
- We must respect age, condition, gender, work, lifestyle, etc
- It is also necessary to consider some technical priorities

Here a pragmatic choice arises, especially relevant for Western bodies today, the question of establishing what are the priority areas within any given Āsana. This question can be examined through the lens of consideration of setting postural priorities around what constitutes a primary characteristic and what constitutes a secondary characteristic. In other words the importance of where, within the form, to choose or allow an adaptation in the Āsana and where, within the form, to endeavour not to compromise the Āsana.

I do feel these days that our understanding in Āsana practice is dominated by the Nāma, or name and the Rūpa or final form, with little emphasis on the Lakṣaṇa or inherent characteristics of the Āsana. Furthermore, how understanding this aspect can have a profound effect on the approach, application and outcome of the overall or accumulative impact of the Āsana within the student's personal practice.

For example, if we choose to consider Uttānāsana, we can look at it and the question of what common points within the Āsana are the primary Lakṣaṇa and what variables are the secondary Lakṣaṇa. From this we can set priorities for adapting the Āsana to retain the focus when we encounter variables, such as too much resistance or stiffness from or within different parts of the body.

In Uttānāsana the primary Lakṣaṇa is generally the spine and the secondary Lakṣaṇa is generally the legs. This means that when we encounter the tug of war between the back and the legs we yield to the the potential of influencing the movement in the spine. Rather than compromise the integrity of the spine in favour of hanging onto the tension or distraction arising from too much of our attention being drawn to the demands of the legs.

Thus the primary focus in Uttānāsana is to experience optimum movement in the spine as we both go down and come up. If the legs are allowed to be more fluid during the movement, then the benefits of this fluidity can be transferred to facilitate a deeper exploration of movement in the spine. Here the movement within the spine is the common point and the differences in the potential flexibility in the legs the variables.

This shift in priorities can offer a quality of localised movement to areas of the spine often held rigid due to the limitations of the legs. This rigidity can be down to variables ranging from performance expectations such as goal centred movement, to the hidden influences of structural genetics. This can be an especially useful guideline to consider when encountering the variables around Āsana practice listed at the beginning of this article.

The next post will consider questions around the planning of an appropriate Āsana practice.

– Extracts from my lessons with TKV Desikachar in 1980, extended in 2020

– Parts 6-10 will be posted across May and Parts 11-15 across July 2020