"Ashtanga Yoga: Asana"

The third limb of Ashtanga Yoga as taught by Maharishi Patanjali

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Introduction to Yoga Asanas

Asanas are a way to listen to the body. To honor the body. To care for this extraordinary instrument.

The body is precious because it houses the divine; it is the temple in which our spirit resides. Although we are not the body (see Saucha of Niyama in the last lecture), the body serves us in the journey of our life. The body is a gift.

The body is that aspect of the physical “reality” that is closest to us. As we invoke human values within us (such as the principles of Yama, Niyama), the body should receive greatest benefit because of its mere proximity to us. For example, as we establish ourselves in Ahimsa, the field of Ahimsa first permeates to the body. Therefore, the cells of the body are in a loving, non-violent space and hence they thrive in health and well being.

Furthermore, the body serves as an indicator, or a monitor. The sensations in the body are reflection of the inner activity (thoughts, emotions, etc). A harmonious & healthy body reflects a harmonious and healthy mind. On the other hand, dis-ease in the body indicates lack of ease in the mind. Therefore we see the value of listening to the body. We can use the indicators from the body as a way to guide our inner transformation. This is the true benefit of Asanas – to aid inner transformation. When we transform our inner world to a space of harmony, the body reflects that in the form of vibrant health and wellness.

According to Yoga and Ayurveda, mere attention to fix the body through physical means is inadequate. This leads only to a cosmetic change that is not sustainable; it attends only to the symptoms. When we continue to harbor inner disharmony, the
disharmony squirts out through the crack of least resistance in the body, creating the next ailment. True healing can happen only through inner harmony.

Maharishi Patanjali describes 3 sutras on Asanas, the third Anga of the Ashtanga Yoga:

II.46 स्थिरसुक्कमासनम्

sthira-sukham āsanam

Yoga Asana is a body posture that is steady and comfort. Based on the understanding above, we see that steadiness and comfort can happen in the physical level only if the same qualities are present within. Therefore, Yoga Asanas are a way to create inner stability and Joy.

II.47 प्रयत्नासायित्वान्तसमापत्तिभ्याम्

prayatna-śaithilyānanta-samāpattibhyām

While in a Yoga Asana, release (saithilya) any struggle (prayatna). Normally, when we learn something new (say a new pose), we tend to offer much more effort than necessary. Let go of this unnecessary effort/struggle. When we do that, we experience infinite bliss (ananta samapatti).

II.48 ततो द्वन्द्वानिविषयः

tato dvandvānivishayah

The core benefit of doing Yoga Asana is captured by Maharishi Patanjali as – removing of Dvandvas or conflicts.

Examples of conflicts abound in the body and mind. We saw one example relating to our food habits – the conflict between the tongue and body intelligence leads one to un-healthy foods. The practice of Asanas brings alignment to the entire system by
resolving the conflicts. All the entities of the body (cells, organs, tissues, senses, etc) work together as one organic unit, as one team.

The origin of dvandva is Rajo guna. Yoga chudamani Upanishad says – “Asanena Rajo hanti” – practice of Yoga Asanas removes Rajas from the system.

Hatha Yoga Pradipika mentions 3 primary benefits of Yoga Asanas:

κुर्यांतदासस्य स्वेत्यमारोग्यं चाङ्गाघवम्

(Chapter 1, verse 17) If a person practices Yoga Asanas, they experience strength (stairyam), become free if illness (arogyam) and feel light in the body (anga laghavam).

Of course, these core, primary benefits percolate through every organ & every system of function in the body creating a multitude of health benefits.

Next session, we’ll see how the powerful practice of Pranayama complements the benefits of Asanas. In fact, Yoga texts emphasize much more on Pranayama than Asanas. We’ll see next time about the value of the breath, secrets of the breath and why Pranayama is so powerful.
Let us conclude with a Prayer on Maharishi Patanjali:

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योगेन चित्तस्य, पदेन वाचः
मलं शरीरस्य च वैधकेन |
yogena cittasya, padena vācāṁ
malam śārīrasya ca vaidyakena |

योश्पाकरोत तं प्रवरं मुनीनां
पतञ्जलिः प्राज्ञलिः आन्तोरिः ||
yo’pākarot tāṁ pravarāṁ munināṁ
patañjalim prāñjalir ānato’ṛiṃ ||

आबाहु पुरुषाकारं
शाहस्चक्रासि धारिणं ||
ābāhu puruṣākāram
śaṅkhacakraśi dhāriṇam ||

सहस्र शिरसं शैवं
प्रणामाति पतञ्जलिः ||
sahasra śirasam śvetam
praṇamāmi patañjalim ||
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**Meaning:**

“I offer reverence to the eminent sage Patañjali, who removed the impurities of the mind through yoga, of speech through grammar, and of the body through medicine.”

“The upper body of human shape, holding a conch (divine sound), discuss (wheel of time) and sword (discrimination), I bow down to the white (pure) thousand-headed (elevated awareness), I respectfully bow to Patanjali.”