Concept of ‘Āsana’ According to Patanjala-Yoga-Sūtras (PYS)

Is it an ‘Ābhyāsa’ or an ‘Ānūsthāna’?¹

☐ Dr. B. R. Sharma²
☐ Mr. T. P. Sreekumaran³
☐ Dr. M. V. Bhole⁴

According to PYS, Āsana is one of the Yogāṇas (PYS-II/29).⁵ Though Patanjali indicates the ‘lakṣaṇa’ and ‘phala or siddhi’ of each of the Yogāṇas, he indicates a direct ‘upaya’ only in the case of ‘āsana’ for its ‘ānūsthāna’ (not for its ‘ābhyāsa’) (PYS-II/47).⁶

The term ‘ābhyāsa’ implies the presence of ‘One fixed end in view’ (i.e., ekārthata). Abhyasa is reported to gain ‘ḍṛḍhabhūmitva’ in that ‘desired end’ which may require repeated efforts as explained by Patanjali in the Sutra PYS-I/14.⁷ This term ‘ābhyāsa’ is used by Patanjali for the first time in the Samadhi-pada for the attainment of ‘vṛttiinirodha’ (वृत्तिनिरोध) (PYS-I/

2. Research Officer, Philosophico-Literary Research Department, Kaivalyadhama S. M. Y. M. Samiti, Lonavla.
4. Joint Director of Research, Kaivalyadhama S. M. Y. M. Samiti, Lonavla, Dist. Poona, Maharashtra (India)—410 403.
5. Yamaniyamāsanaprāṇayāmapratyāhāradharaṇādhyānasamādhhāyo ‘ṛṭavaṅgāni.
   (यमनियमासनप्राणयामप्रात्याहारद्वारान्द्यानसमाध्योऽस्मात्वः)
6. Prayaṭnaśaithityānanstasmāpattibhyām.
   (प्रयत्नशैथिष्ठानसत्समापतिभ्यम्).
7. Sa tu dīrghakālanairantarīyatarkārā sevito dṛḍhabhūmiḥ.
   (सतुदीर्घकालनाइरांतरियात्कारारात्तका सेवितो द्रढःभूमि:)
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13) and against the recurrence of ‘vṛttisārūpya’ (वृत्तिसारूप्य) (PYS-I/4). The choice here is between ‘vṛttinirodha’ and ‘vṛttisārūpya’ and therefore the ‘repetition of effort’ conveyed by the term ‘ābhyāsa’ is for the attainment of ‘vṛttinirodha’ only. The success in the ‘ābhyāsa’ here means ‘drḍhahbhumītvā’ (दृढभूमित्व) in the condition of ‘vṛttinirodha’ (वृत्तिनिरोध). This term ‘ābhyāsa’ has been used a second time by Patanjali in a similar context while discussing the remedial measure against the ‘antarāyās’ (अन्तराय). The tendency of the Citta is to slip back again and again into the condition of ‘Cittavikṣepa’ (चित्तविक्षेप) which obstructs the manifestation of ‘Samadhi’. Patanjali, therefore, prescribes a remedial measure against the Cittavikṣepas. Here the choice before the sadhaka is between samadhi and cittavikṣepa. So the ‘ābhyāsa’ prescribed here is only with ‘one fixed end in view’, that is the attainment of samadhi. Thus, whenever Patanjali uses the term ‘ābhyāsa’ in his Sutras, he also provides a specific and fixed end to be achieved by the sadhakas (i.e., ‘ekārtha’) and he prescribes appropriate ‘ābhyāsa’ to get ‘drḍhahbhumītvā’ in the chosen end in each of the above contexts.

Patanjali talks only in terms of ‘anuṣṭhāna’ of the ‘yogāṅgas’ (PYS-II/98) not the ‘ābhyāsa’ thereof. The term ‘anuṣṭhāna’ implies, ‘commencement’, ‘carrying out’, ‘undertaking’, ‘performance’, ‘acting in conformity to’, etc. Patanjali seems to talk in terms of getting pratiṣṭhā, (प्रतिष्ठा), ‘sthairya’ (स्थैर्य), ‘yogyata’ or yogyatva’ (योगयता or योगयत्व), etc. In the ‘yogāṅgas’ through their ‘anuṣṭhāna’. The sadhaka has to fall in line with, or be in tune with, or fulfill the requirements of, or act in conformity to the requirements of the ‘yogāṅgas’ which are inseparable among themselves by nature.

1. ‘Tatra sthitau yatno’ bhyāṣaḥ.
   (तत्र स्थितो यत्नो भृत्याः)

2. ‘vṛttisārūpyamitaratra’
   (वृत्तिसारूप्यमितरत्र)

3. ‘Tām (sthitim), nimittkṛtya yatnāḥ punaḥ punaḥ tathātvena cetasi nivesanamabhāṣaḥ.
   (तां (स्थितम्) निमित्तकृत्य यतनाः पुनः पुनः तथात्वेन चेतसि निवेशनभाषाः)

4. According to Swami Digambari, the term ‘ābhyasa’ means the ‘process of becoming’! (Personal communication from Swamiji).

5. ‘Yogāṅgānuṣṭhānādāsuddhiṣya jñānādipitrāvivekakhyāteḥ’.
   (योगांगाः गुणुष्ठाः सुधिन्य ज्ञानदीपित्राविवेकक्षेत्रे)

6. According to Swami Digambari, the term ‘anuṣṭhāna’ means ‘the process of remaining in a certain condition’. (Personal communication from Swamiji).
Obviously, this could be the reason why Patanjali avoids the usage of ‘abhyāsa’ in his discussions on the yogāṅgas. But, it seems that most of the commentators of the Yoga-Sutras have confused the term ‘abhyāsa’ with the term ‘anuṣṭhān’ which led to much of the misinterpretations and therefore mis-representation regarding the yogāṅgas, their real significance and importance as envisaged in the Yoga-Sutras (Vyasa and Vacaspati on PYS-I/13, II/50 & 52a, Vacaspati on PYS-II/51a and Vyasa on PYS-II/53a).

This confusion between the ‘anuṣṭhāna’ and ‘abhyāsa’ in relation to yogāṅgas seems to get compounded due to the mis-interpretation of the ‘lakṣaṇa or ‘svarūpa’ (लक्षण or स्वरूप) of the yogāṅgas like ‘āsana’ and ‘prāṇāyāma’ as ‘the means’ or ‘upāya’ for the proper ‘anuṣṭhāna’ of these yogāṅgas by commentators like Vyasa and Vacaspati (PYS-II/50a).

A careful analysis of the Sūtras on the Yogāṅgas indicates the lakṣaṇa as well as the phala or Siddhi for each of them. But, it seems, a direct ‘upāya’ (उपाय) is indicated only in the case of ‘āsana’ (PYS-II/47). Of course,

1. ‘.....tatsādhanānuṣṭhānamabhyāsaḥ,
   (तत्साध्यनानुष्ठातनमभयासः)
   ‘.....yamaṇiyādāni’
   (यमयनियादानि)

2. ‘.....abhyāsto dirghasukṣmah’
   (श्रव्यस्तो दीर्घसुक्ष्मः)
   ‘.....pratyahamabhyāsto.....’
   (प्रत्याहमाभयास्)

3. ‘prāṇāyāmabhayasyato.....’
   (प्राणायामाभयास्यात्)
   Vacaspati quotes Viṣṇupurāṇa
   ‘.....vaśyamabhयāsātikurute....’
   (वषयमाभयासातू कुलते)

4. ‘.....abhyāsāsāvikṛtāt.....’
   (श्रव्यासवासविकृतात्)

5. ‘prāṇāyāmabhयāsādeva’
   (प्राणायामाभयासादेव)

6. Ibid. (2) above on the Sutra PYS-II/50.

7. ‘prayatnaśaithilya-anantasamāpattibhyām’
   (प्रयत्नशायित्य-अनन्तसमापत्तिभयाम्)
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we come across a variety of ‘upāyas’ related to manasāḥ sthiti-nibandhanī (मनसाḥ स्थिति-निबंधनी) (PYS-II/34-30) in the Samādhipāda which may be interpreted to be akin to the Yogāṇa, dhāraṇā, referred to in the later two chapters. (PYS-II/53 & III/1)². But Patanjali does not seem to indicate these ‘upāyas’ directly while discussing the topic of ‘dhāraṇā’ in Vībhūtipāda. Even in respect of ‘yama’ and ‘niyama’, if at all any ‘upāyas’ are mentioned there, they seem to be in a negative sense as can be seen from the Śūtra ; ‘vitarka-bādhane pratipakṣa-bhāvanām’ (वितर्क-बाधने प्रतिपक्ष-भावनाम) (PYS-II/-33). This seems to be only a ‘vighna-parihāra-upāya’ (विघ्नपरिहारोपाय) thereof.

However, as mentioned earlier Patanjali indicates not only the lakṣaṇa and phala or siddhi of ‘āsana’, but also its ‘upāya’. We get some indications of how the commentators might have got into confusion between the ‘lakṣaṇa’ of a Yogāṇa with its ‘upāya’ from the way they have interpreted the Śūtra : ‘sthirasukhamāsanaṁ’ (स्थिरसुखमासनम्) (PYS-II/46). Most of the commentators seem to have divided the compound word sthirasukhaṁ (स्थिरसुख) into two independent words ‘sthiraṁ’ (स्थिरम्) and ‘sukham’ (सुखम्). Though this is grammatically admissible, in a practical context as in the case of ‘āsana’, it seems to have led to misinterpretation of the related Śūtra. Thus, some of the commentators have given the meaning—‘niscalam’ (निस्कलम्), ‘niśkampan’ (निस्कमपन्), etc. For the term ‘sthiraṁ’ (स्थिरम्). Naturally, the word ‘sthiraṁ’ got directly related to the term ‘āsanaṁ’ (आसनम्) which they have defined as—‘āsyate āste vā anena ēte āsanaṁ’ (आस्यते-आस्ते वा अनेन-इति-आसनम्). As a

1. prachārdapana-vidhāraṇābhyām vā prāṇasya (PYS-II/34)
   (प्रचारंविधारणाभ्याम वा प्राणस्य)
   ‘viśāyavatī vā pravrīttruppanā manasāḥ sthitiṅibandhanī’ (-II/35).
   (विशायवती वा प्रवृत्तरूपमानानि-स्थिति निबंधनी)
   ‘viśokā vā jyotiṁmatī’ (-II/36).
   (विशोकावा ज्योतिःमती)
   ‘vitaraṅga-visayām vā cittrām’ (-II/37).
   (वितराङगविसायाम वा चित्राम)
   ‘svapnanidṛjñānālambanām vā’ (-II/38).
   (स्वप्ननिद्राभानालम्बनम् वा)
   ‘yathābhimamatdhīyanād vā’ (-II/39).
   (यथाभिमामतद्धीयानाद वा)

2. ‘dhāraṇāsu ca yogyatā manasaḥ’ (-II/53).
   (धारांसू यज्ञोपरि मनसा:)‘deśabandhacittasya dhāraṇaḥ’ (-II/1).
   (देशस्तुस्चितःस्य धारणा)
result, ‘to sit steadily and comfortably’ came to be accepted as the ‘lakṣaṇa’ as well as the ‘upāya’ of ‘āsana’. As a consequence of this interpretation, it seems, the next Sūtra, which really provides the direct ‘upāya’ of ‘āsana’ lost its real significance in practice. That is why ‘āsana’ is generally taken to be related solely to the physical body and its positionings.

In fact, the term ‘sthira’ should directly qualify the term ‘sukham’ (as ‘sthira’ is an adjective or viśeṣaṇa of the term ‘sukhaṁ’) so as to get the meaning of ‘sukha-sthiratva’ (that is, ‘endless comfort’) which could automatically lead to the manifestation of ‘āsana’.

Similarly a careful analysis of the Sūtra—‘tasmin sati śvāsapraśvāsayoh gati-vicchedaḥ prāṇāyāmah’ (तस्मिनं सति śvāsapraśvāsayoh gati-vicchedaḥ prāṇāyāmah) (PYS-II/49) shows that the mastery and ‘anuṣṭhāna’ of ‘āsana’ automatically leads to ‘prāṇāyāma’. The śvāsā-prāśvāsa (śvāsā-prāśvāsa) which is one of the indicative of ‘citta-vikṣepa’ (चित्तविक्षेप) (PYS-I/31) get ‘broken off’ vicchedaḥ (विक्षेपः) in a specific manner in the ‘prāṇāyāma’. Patanjali indicates four specific manners in which such ‘breaking off’ of the flow of the breathing activity can take place during ‘prāṇāyāma’. By using the term ‘paridṛṣṭaḥ’ (परिदृश्यः), Patanjali seems to indicate that ‘prāṇāyāma is seen to happen’ in such four specific categories. But, most of the commentators seem to interpret these four categories of prāṇāyama as four specific techniques of ‘prāṇāyāma’ for its ‘abhyāsa’. This, again, as in the case of ‘āsana’, the commentators seem to have confused the lakṣaṇa of four kinds of prāṇāyama as four different techniques or ‘upāyas’ thereof (PYS-II/50 & 51).² As such Patanjali does not seem to have given any Sūtra to provide a direct ‘upāya’ for ‘prāṇāyāma’. From this, we may deduce that by the removal of the assault of the ‘dvandva’, the ‘anuṣṭhāna of āsana’ reduces or eliminates the causes of ‘cittavikṣepa’ (चित्तविक्षेप) in due course of time when the phenomenon of ‘prāṇāyāma’ takes place as a natural outcome. We may also note, in this connection, that a parallel phenomenon of progression from one ‘ānga’ to another takes place in the case of ‘dharāṇa’ (धारणा), ‘dhyāna’ (ध्यान), and

1. ‘duḥkha-dauryamanāya-anāgamanajyātva-śvāsapravāsā vikṣepa-sahabhuvah’.
   (दुःख-दौर्मयमाय-अनागमनाय-स्वासप्रवासाय विक्षेपसहभुवः)
2. bāhyābhyantarastambhayāt-tīh-deśa-kāla-saṁkhya-bhīh paridṛṣṭo dirgha-sūkṣmah’ (II/51).
   (बाह्याभ्यान्तरस्तंभायात् तीः-देश-काल-संख्या-भी विद्युष्टे दीर्घसमृद्धः)
   ‘bāhyābhyantara viṣayāpeṣu caturthah’ (II/51).
   (बाह्याभ्यान्तर-विषयापेषे चतुर्थः)
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‘samādhi’ (समाधि) (PYS-III/1-3)†. In the same manner, it seems that the ‘anuṣṭhāna’ (not the ‘abhīṣa’) of ‘āsana’, leads to the manifestation of ‘prāṇa-
yāma’ which by itself, in its turn, leads to ‘dharana’ and so on. Of course, the element of ‘pratyāhāra’ is present in each and every of the other ‘āngas’ without which it is doubtful if any ‘anuṣṭhāna’ of them is at all possible.

The above line of interpretation and thinking seem to receive experimental support from the work of Dr. Trigant Burrow as quoted by Late Swami Kuvalayananda and Dr. S. L. Vinekar in their book ‘Yogic Therapy’² Moreover, remarks made by Swami Kuvalayananda based on his personal experience and observations of other Yoga-sādhakas³ seem to substantiate this line of thinking based on a re-interpretation of the Yoga-sūtras.

From the above discussions, it may be concluded that proper re-interpretations of PYS can help us to understand the importance and significance of ‘āsana’ as a yogānga’ by differentiating between ‘abhīṣa’ and ‘anuṣṭhāna’ and to switch over from the former to the latter in the practical application of this knowledge.

1. ‘deśabandhaścittasya dhāraṇā’ (III/1).
   (देशवन्धविचत्स्म्यद्धारणा)
   ‘tatra pratyayaikatānātā dhyānam’ (III/2).
   (तत्र प्रत्ययायेकतानाता ध्यानम्)
   ‘tadevārthamātrānirbhāsam svarupaśunyamiva samādhiḥ’ (III/3).
2. Yogic Therapy : Its Basic Principles and Methods by Swami Kuvalayananda and Dr. S. L. Vinekar : Ministry of Health, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1963, pp. 74-77.
3. ASANAS by Swami Kuvalayananda, Popular Prakashan, Bombay 1931; p. 132.