



## Concept of 'Āsana' According to Pātañjala-Yoga-Sūtras (PYS)

Is it an 'Ābhyāsa' or an 'Anuṣṭhāna' ?<sup>1</sup>

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According to PYS, *Āsana* is one of the *Yogāṅgas* (PYS-II/29).<sup>5</sup> Though Patanjali indicates the '*lakṣaṇa*' and '*phala or siddhi*' of each of the *Yogāṅgas*, he indicates a direct '*upaya*' only in the case of '*āsana*' for its '*anuṣṭhāna*' (not for its '*abhyāsa*') (PYS-II/47).<sup>6</sup>

The term '*abhyāsa*' implies the presence of '*One fixed end in view*' (i. e., *ekārthatā*). *Abhyasa* is reported to gain '*dṛḍhabhūmitva*' in that '*desired end*' which may require repeated efforts as explained by Patanjali in the Sutra PYS-I/14.<sup>7</sup> This term '*abhyāsa*' is used by Patanjali for the first time in the Samadhi-pada for the attainment of '*vṛttinirodha*' (वृत्तिनिरोध) (PYS-I/

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5. Yamaniyamāsanaprāṇayāmapratyāhārādharanādhyanasamādhāyo 'ṣṭāvaṅgāni.  
(यमनियमासनप्राणायामप्रत्याहारधारणाध्यान समाधयोऽष्टावङ्गानि)
6. Prayatnaṣaithilyānantasamāpattibhyām.  
(प्रयत्नशैथिल्यानन्तसमापत्तिभ्याम्).
7. Sa tu dīrghakālanairantaryasatkārā sevito dṛḍhabhūmiḥ.  
(स तु दीर्घकाल नैरन्तर्यसत्कारासेवितो दृढभूमिः)

13)<sup>1</sup> and against the recurrence of 'vṛttisārūpya' (वृत्तिसारूप्य) (PYS-I/4).<sup>2</sup> The choice here is between 'vṛttinirodhaḥ' and 'vṛttisārūpya' and therefore the 'repetition of effort' conveyed by the term 'abhyāsa'<sup>3</sup> is for the attainment of 'vṛttinirodha' only. The success in the 'abhyāsa' here means 'dṛḍhabhūmitva' (दृढभूमित्व) in the condition of 'vṛttinirodha' (वृत्तिनिरोध). This term 'abhyāsa' has been used a second time by Patanjali in a similar context while discussing the remedial measure against the 'antarāyās' (अन्तरायाः). 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 'abhyāsa' prescribed here is only with 'one fixed end in view', that is the attainment of *samadhi*. Thus, whenever Patanjali uses the term 'abhyāsa' in his Sūtras, he also provides 'a specific and fixed end to be achieved by the sadhakas (i. e., 'ekārthata') and he prescribes appropriate 'abhyāsa' to get 'dṛḍhabhūmitva' in the chosen end in each of the above contexts<sup>4</sup>.

Patanjali talks only in terms of 'anuṣṭhāna' of the 'yogāṅgas' (PYS-II/98)<sup>5</sup> not the 'abhyāsa' thereof. The term 'anuṣṭhāna' implies, 'commencement', 'carrying out', 'undertaking', 'performance' 'acting in conformity to' etc.<sup>6</sup> Patanjali seems to talk in terms of getting *pratiṣṭhā*, (प्रतिष्ठा), 'sthairya' (स्थैर्य), 'yogyatā' or 'yogyatva' (योग्यता or योग्यत्व), 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' bhyāsaḥ.  
(तत्र स्थितौ यत्नोऽभ्यासः)
2. 'vṛttisārūpyamitaratra'  
(वृत्तिसारूप्यमितरत्र)
3. 'Tām (sthitim), nimittikṛtya yatnaḥ punaḥ punaḥ tathātvena cetasi nivesanamabhyāsaḥ'.  
(तां (स्थितिं) निमित्तीकृत्य यत्नः पुनः पुनः तथात्वेन चेतसि निवेशनमभ्यासः)
4. According to Swami Digambarji, the term 'abhyasa' means the 'process of becoming' (Personal communication from Swamiji).
5. 'Yogāṅgānuṣṭhānādaśuddhikṣaye jñānādīptirāvivēkakhyāteḥ'.  
(योगाङ्गानुष्ठानादशुद्धिक्षये ज्ञानदीप्तिराविवेकख्यातेः)
6. According to Swami Digambarji, the term 'anuṣṭhāna' means 'the process of remaining in a certain condition'. (Personal communication from Swamiji).

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तव हो सके  
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Obviously, this could be the reason why Patanjali avoids the usage of 'abhyāsa' in his discussions on the *yogāngas*. 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 *yogāngas*, their real significance and importance as envisaged in the Yoga-Sutras (Vyasa and Vacaspati on PYS-I/13,<sup>1</sup> II/50<sup>2</sup> & 52<sup>3</sup>, Vacaspati on PYS-II/51<sup>4</sup> and Vyasa on PYS-II/53<sup>5</sup>).

This confusion between the 'anuṣṭhāna' and 'abhyāsa' in relation to *yogāngas* seems to get compounded due to the mis-interpretation of the 'lakṣaṇa' or 'svarūpa' (लक्षण or स्वरूप) of the *yogāngas* like 'āsana' and 'prāṇāyāma' as 'the means' or 'upāya' for the proper 'anuṣṭhāna' of these *yogāngas* by commentators like Vyasa and Vacaspati (PYS-II/50)<sup>6</sup>.

A careful analysis of the Sūtras on the Yogāngas 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).<sup>7</sup> Of course,

1. '.... tatsādhanānuṣṭhānamabhyāsaḥ,  
(तत्साधनानुष्ठानमभ्यासः)  
'.... yamaniymādīni'  
(यमनिमादीनि)
2. '.... abhyasto dirghasukṣmah'  
(अभ्यस्तो दीर्घसूक्ष्मः)  
'.....pratyahamabhyasto....'  
(प्रत्यहमभ्यस्तो)
3. 'prāṇāyāmānabhyasyato....'  
(प्राणायामानभ्यस्तो)  
Vacaspati quotes Viṣṇupurāṇa  
'.... vaśyamabhyāsātkurute....'  
(वश्यमभ्यासात् कुरुते)
4. '.... abhyāsavaśīkṛtāt....'  
(अभ्यासवशीकृतात्)
5. 'prāṇāyāmābhyāsādeva'  
(प्राणायामाभ्यासादेव)
6. Ibid. (2) above on the Sutra PYS-II/50.
7. 'prayatnaśaithilya-anantasamāpattibhyām'  
(प्रयत्नशैथिल्य-अनन्तसमापत्तिभ्याम्)

we come across a variety of 'upāyas' related to *manasāḥ sthiti-nibandhani* (मनसः स्थिति निबन्धनी) (PYS-II/34-30)<sup>1</sup> in the Samādhipāda which may be interpreted to be akin to the Yogāṅga, *dhāraṇā*, referred to in the later two chapters. (PYS-II/53 & III/1)<sup>2</sup>. But Patanjali does not seem to indicate these 'upāyas' directly while discussing the topic of '*dhāraṇā*' in Vibhūtipāda. 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 Sūtra ; '*vitarka-bādhane pratipakṣa-bhāvanam*' (वितर्क बाधने प्रतिपक्ष भावनम्) (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 Yogāṅga with its 'upāya' from the way they have interpreted the Sūtra : '*sthīrasukhamāsanam*' (स्थिरसुखमासनम्) (PYS-II/46). Most of the commentators seem to have divided the compound word *sthīrasukham* (स्थिरसुखम्) into two independent words '*sthīram*' (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 Sūtra. Thus, some of the commentators have given the meaning—'*niscalam* (निष्कलम्), '*niṣkampan*' (निष्कम्पम्), etc. For the term '*sthīram*' (स्थिरम्). Naturally, the word '*sthīram*' got directly related to the term '*āsanam*' (आसनम्) which they have defined as—'*āsyate āste vā anena ite āsanam*' (आस्यते-आस्ते वाऽनेन-इति-आसनम्). As a

1. *pracchardana-vidhāraṇābhyāṁ vā prāṇasya* (PYS-II/34)  
(प्रच्छर्दनविधारणाभ्यां वा प्राणस्य)  
'*viśayavati vā pravṛttrūpannā manasāḥ sthitinibandhani*' (-II/35).  
(विषयवती वा प्रवृत्तिरूपन्नामनसःस्थिति निबन्धनी)  
'*viśokā vā jyotiṣmati*' (-II/36).  
(विशोका वा ज्योतिष्मति)  
'*vitaraṅgaviśayam vā cittam*' (-II/37).  
(वीतराग विषयां वा चित्तम्)  
'*svapnanidrājñānālambanam vā*' (-II/38).  
(स्वप्ननिद्राज्ञानालम्बनं वा)  
'*yathābhimatadhyānād vā*' (-II/39).  
(यथाभिमतध्यानाद् वा)
2. '*dhāraṇāsu ca योग्याता manasāḥ*' (-II/53).  
(धारणासु चयोग्यता मनसः)  
'*deśabandhaścittasya dhāraṇā*' (-II/1).  
(देशबन्धश्चित्तस्य धारणा)

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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 'sukham') 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 śvāsapraśvāsayoḥ gati-vicchedaḥ prāṇāyāmaḥ' (तस्मिन्सति-श्वासप्रश्वासयोः-गति-विच्छेदः प्राणायामः) (PYS-II/49) shows that the mastery and 'anuṣṭhāna' of 'āsana' automatically leads to 'prāṇāyāma'. The 'śvāsa-praśvāsa' (श्वास-प्रश्वास) which is one of the indicatives of 'citta-vikṣepa' (चित्तविक्षेप) (PYS-I/31)<sup>1</sup> get 'broken off' 'vicchedaḥ' (विच्छेदः) 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' (परिदृष्टः), 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).<sup>2</sup> 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 'dvandvas', 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 'aṅga' to another takes place in the case of 'dhāraṇa' (धारणा), 'dhyāna' (ध्यान), and

1. 'duḥkha-daurmanasya-aṅgamejayatva-śvāsapraśvāsā vikṣepa-sahabhavaḥ'.  
(दुःख-दौर्मनस्य-अङ्गमेजयत्व-श्वासप्रश्वासा विक्षेपसहभुवः)
2. 'bāhyābhyantarastambhavṛttiḥ-deśa-kāla-saṁkhyābhiḥ paridṛṣṭo dīrgha-sūkṣmah' (II/51).  
(बाह्याभ्यन्तरस्तम्भ वृत्तिर्देशकाल-संख्याभिः परिदृष्टो दीर्घसूक्ष्मः)  
'bāhyābhyantara viśayāpekṣī caturthah' (II/51).  
(बाह्याभ्यन्तर-विषयापेक्षी चतुर्थः)

'samādhi' (समाधि) (PYS-III/1-3)<sup>1</sup>. In the same manner, it seems that the 'anusthāna' (not the 'ābhyāsa') of 'āsana', leads to the manifestation of 'prāṇa-yāma' which by itself, in its turn, leads to 'dhāraṇā' and so on. Of course, the element of 'pratyāhāra' is present in each and every of the other 'aṅgas' without which it is doubtful if any 'anusthāna' 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'<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, remarks made by Swami Kuvalayananda based on his personal experience and observations of other Yoga-sādhakas<sup>3</sup> 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 'yogāṅga' by differentiating between 'ābhyāsa' and 'anusthāna' and to switch over from the former to the latter in the practical application of this knowledge.



1. 'deśabandhaścittasya dhāraṇā' (III/1).  
(देशबन्धश्चित्तस्यधारणा)  
'tatra pratyayaikatānatā dhyānam' (III/2).  
(तत्र प्रत्ययैकतानता ध्यानम्)  
'tadevārthamātranirbhāsam svarupaśunyamiva samādhih' (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. *ĀSANAS* by Swami Kuvalayananda, Popular Prakashan, Bombay 1931; p. 132.

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