

What is an asana?

By Carl Baier *Yoga Rahasya*, Volume A, pp 89-97

What is an asana? This is a question aimed at the core from which and by which an asana is what it is and as it is. It is a philosophical inquiry into its essence.

From the old Indian Sources through the yoga literature of our times the question about the essence of asana has attracted astonishingly little attention. The texts are mostly interested in the way the poses should be performed and their effects.

I wish to give two examples, an old one and a new one, to prove this assertion.

An 'ancient' explanation of an asana

Patanjali states in Yoga Sutra: 11.48 *sthira sukham asanam*, i.e. the posture is to be firm and delightful. This is surely not intended as a definition of the essence of asana. Patanjali already presupposes a certain understanding of what an asana, a so-called yogic posture is. He does not say what he means by an asana, and the essence of it in which the possibility of firmness, happiness and all the other qualities and effects of asana are rooted, is not disclosed. He only describes the way it should be performed. In a similar manner YS II.47 and II.48 define the criteria of perfection in asana and the results of mastering it.

A 'modern' explanation of an asana

M.M. Gore in *Anatomy and Physiology of Yogic Practice* has made an attempt to explain what an asana is (pp 72-77; 1991) 'Traditionally,' he says correctly, 'asana means a sitting position or position of the body which contributes to the steadiness of the body and mind and the sense of well being. The term asana is also used to indicate a carpet of grass, well-tanned deer hide, square piece of cloth or a mat which is utilized as a comfortable (seat) on the ground for sitting.' With these introductory words of his inquiry he describes the traditional meaning of the term and paraphrases YS II.46.

Obviously, this only gives an outline of what an asana is. The core of the matter is not yet touched, because the essential inner process which leads to steadiness of body and mind and sense of well being is not given. After this, he criticizes the translations of the term (asana) into English because they do not capture its essential meaning: Asana as a posture, pose and exercise.

Is asana a 'posture'?

Firstly asanas are often translated as postures. It is true that asanas are the modified part of the three basic human postures, i.e., standing, sitting or lying postures and bear most of the characteristic of posture. Yet asanas and postures differ in many respects. The term does not convey fully the meaning of asana. What are the differences? He argues that the state of the mind is not very important in the postures used in daily life. Most of the time we are not aware of the postures we perform. We develop and maintain them without noticing them while we are attentive to the various kinds of thoughts, tasks and work we do. On the contrary asana is acquired voluntarily, with full concentration on what and how we are doing it.

Is asana a 'pose'?

Another translation of asana is pose. According to Gore this is also not a suitable word. 'Pose is not a natural position of the body. It is assumed artificially to express some emotion or thought.' A yogi performing asanas is not an actor who poses to express some feelings.

Is asana an 'exercise'?

The term 'exercise' is also not satisfying because it is linked too much to sports and gymnastics. 'The word exercise gives us an idea of quick and forceful movements of the body or its parts and repeated actions which usually lead to exertion, tension and fatigue. Asanas, on the other hand, are practiced slowly and steadily, which bring about physical and mental relaxation. The purpose of body building is absent in asanas.' The background of this argument is the style of performing asanas at Lonavla. But even if one takes into account that in the modern schools of yoga which were inspired by Krishnamacharya (Iyengar, Desikachar, Patabhi Jois), dynamic ways of practicing were developed which also train the muscular strength of the body, the word 'exercise' without further explanation does not convey the peculiar feature of asana which differs from sports and gymnastic exercises.

Is asana a 'postural pattern'?

After the critical discussion of the usual translations of asana, Gore tries to give a new one. He translates and thereby defines asana as a 'postural pattern'. Although this proposal is not bad it is not sufficient for an essential derivation of asana. Gore does not explain the significant structure of the inner life of the so-called postural pattern. The experience which discloses the true meaning of asana is not analyzed. Instead of this Gore like all the other authors on the subject immediately turns to describe how they have to be performed and their effects.

These two examples may be enough to show that the problem of a definition of the essence of asana from Patanjali up to our time is an unanswered question.

But how should one be able to practice something and how should one understand the effects of practicing, if one has no insight into its essence?

What is the essence of an asana?

It is true that every attentive practice leads towards an inarticulate familiarity with the essence of whatever is practiced. But the articulated question and answer about the essence is nevertheless of great importance because it helps one to avoid wrong ways of practicing and points to the deepness of experience. A depth which is very soon hidden through a superficial understanding and which even the very experienced practitioner has to bring to her/his mind again and again to bring deeper life to it. Senseless and shallow routine starts if the essence of asana is not understood or forgotten. Especially the teacher should have a profound and dear knowledge of the essence of whatever she or he teaches because of her/his responsibility of communicating the very core of the subject that is taught.

During my stay in Pune in July 1992 I had the opportunity of discussing various problems concerning the history and philosophy of Iyengar Yoga with its founder. In one of our talks I asked Gurujī the question which was not answered by the yoga books that I had read: 'What is an asana?' He thought it over for a moment and then gave the following concise, philosophical definition.

What is the definition of an asana?

Asana is a process of posing and reposing through which by balancing its involutory movement the mind reaches the state of tranquility.

This statement tries to unveil to some extent the essence of asana. In a terse, sutra-like form it contains important thoughts which are worth being considered by every yoga practitioner, because they are able to guide us into the depth of the yogic experience. I shall give a short commentary by explaining the terms of the definition.

Asana is a process

Asana is not something static. It is not a transformation of a living person into a statue made of stone. On the contrary according to Guruji, the very essence of the asana is a steady movement, a process which does not simply end but finds its fulfillment in tranquility.

One tends to think that what can be seen on the photographs of yoga books is identical with the asana. But what one sees on the photograph is never the pose in its true being; it is a snapshot which only captures one short moment of what in reality is an ongoing process of posing and reposing. From the point of view of the practitioner's experience there is no pose (as an externally perceived object), there is only the act of carrying out the posturing. The question which now arises is how the process of carrying out the asana is structured. It is answered in the next part of Guruji's definition.

Asana is a process of posing and reposing

The terms posing and reposing define the peculiar character of the process, which constitutes the essence of asana. Both have their special meaning within Guruji's asana philosophy.

Posing is not the artificial expression of some thought or emotion, as Gore defined it, but: Posing

means action. 'Pose is assuming a fixed position of the limbs and the body as represented by the particular asana being performed.' (Tree of Yoga, p. 54) The word repose is used in an unusual way: Reposing means reflection on the pose. 'The pose is re-thought and readjusted so that the various limbs and parts of the body are positioned in their places in a proper order and feel rested and soothed, and the mind experiences the tranquility and calmness of the bones, joints, muscles, fibres and cells.' (Tree of Yoga, p. 54-55)

As a combination of posing and reposing, carrying out an asana reveals itself as a process with a circular structure. The practitioner repeatedly comes back to the assumed pose to readjust it. The readjusted pose is the starting point for new readjustment. What can be gained through this strenuous purification? Which are the principles that give the readjustment its direction?

A clue is hidden in the term repose. Notice the double meaning that Guruji gives to it. Re-pose means to take up the positioning again, to re-adjust the pose, and secondly repose in the usual sense of the word means rest, coming to a standstill, gaining silence.

I shall speak about this aim of the asana at the end of the commentary. From this we must consider the means by which tranquillity is gained. What are the principles that guide us to tranquillity? And most of all what is the nature of the process of posing and reposing ?

Asana as posing and reposing is a kind of balancing

Guruji describes the process of posing and reposing as a balancing movement. What is balance? To be in balance is a way of being which is granted to entities that have a specific structure. A thing is able to be in balance or out of balance when its being is constituted in its wholeness by antagonistic elements which are related to each other in such a way that they are able to harmonize and so create a unity with one another or on the contrary, disturb each other and destroy the wholeness of the entity which they constitute.

Balancing these constitutive elements means to strive for a state of equilibrium between them so that they work together in building up and unifying the wholeness which they constitute although they oppose each other. For example in order to ride a bicycle, the tendency to fall to the right side and the opposite tendency to fall to the left have to be balanced. There is a danger of a cyclist losing his balance if the cyclist leans towards one side and then the opposed tendency has to be strengthened by adding more weight on the other side. The attempt to equalize the predominance of one side by giving more weight to the other is always liable to cause the reversed loss of balance. The art of balance is the art of not overemphasizing one side. If the movement is balanced it doesn't wobble from side to side but is held on the straight middle line. On the middle line the opponents which constitute it become invisible. The result is, steady and calm movement with a single direction that does not fluctuate.

Asana is the balancing of the evolution and involution

To be in balance means to be constituted by the integration of antagonistic principles. Therefore a definition which describes the essence of asana as balance has also to define these opposed primary constituents.

In every pose two basic contradictory tendencies are set in motion which Gururji in his definition calls involution and evolution. As in every structure which is constituted by a balancing process, they always are in danger of overwhelming each other, so that equilibrium is lost. Therefore, the basic task in the process of posing and reposing is to balance involution and evolution.

Evolution is the movement from the centre to the periphery, from the inside to the outside, from the muscles to the skin, from the source of activity into the vastness, openness of our world. It is connected with effort, fire, sweat and heat which awaken our sleeping powers. Evolution in asana means to bring the stretch to its maximum. One could call it *pravritti marga*, the part of activity within the performance of asana, which is a creation of space that opens the practitioner towards the world. According to Gururji, this principle also has an analogy in the Yoga Sutras which describe the first of the two necessary means to gain the restraint of the fluctuations of consciousness as *abhyasa* or dedicated, steadfast effort. (II.13-14)

Involution is the contrary movement from the periphery to the centre, from outside to inside, from the skin towards the muscle, from the world towards the self. It is the elements of relaxation and surrender with extension. Involution in asana represents what is called in Indian philosophical terms as *nivritti marga*. Regarding the Yoga Sutras this element corresponds to *vairagya*, freedom from desires, detachment. (YS I.15-16)

With concern to the practice of asana, involution is a more inner and hidden movement than the evolutionary one. Gururji gave a practical example of this principle in one of his talks, 'Stretch your hand. You say, "Oh my finger has gone long." But when I stretch, I see how much my energy has come back nearer to me. In my stretching I don't look at the length of my hand, I look at the length of my energy which comes from the peripheral areas to my mind. That is *vairagya*. In my practice, although it appears to you as external, I am a *vairagya* inside.' (70 Glorious Years, p 215)

Both tendencies of movement, the evolutionary and the involutory seem to be contradictory. But nevertheless in a correct pose they are interlocked and even support each other. The more evolution, the more involution. Only if we open ourselves and extend to the maximum do the barriers break and we can enter the inner core because perfect extension creates a flow of awareness from the periphery to the source of activity, the centre of the body and its rootedness in the ground. Thus complete extension points back to where it starts from and unveils the source of the movement.

In his Tree Of Yoga, Gururji compares the twofold movement of evolution and involution with the movement of life within a tree. In practicing asanas you 'feel the energy flowing in your system. You feel how it is working, how it is flowing. In the tree, the energy flows from the seed to the leaves, and as the leaves make contact with the air they feed energy back on a reverse journey thorough the branches and the stem to the root. and the root makes the tree grow further to produce the blossom, fruits and flowers.' (Tree of Yoga, p 18)

The aim of asana as balancing involution and evolution is tranquility of the mind

If evolution and involution, abhyasa and vairagya, pravritti marga and nivritti marga are balanced within the pose a new tranquility of awareness emerges. The practitioner is now in a state of poise and tranquility.

Calmness and tranquility are not the mere opposite of movement but its perfection. A movement which is balanced and without inner or outer hindrances has the quality of a calm and steady flow. It does not disturb the hidden centre of the moving entity but reveals it. Therefore, tranquility is not boring emptiness wherein nothing happens but the peak experience of abundance and vitality connected with a stability and centredness which keep the practitioner in steady touch with his/her innerself. Tranquility does not mean being untouchable and nonsentient but it means the ability to span the openness of the universe and remember the core of existence even in difficult situations. Calmness is the appearance of the origin. It happens when the presence of the source shines forth whenever we are touched by the source of being we become calm because our wishes and desire vanish as we feel an inner abundance which has no end.

Source: *Yoga Rahasya*, Volume A, pp 89-97]

Two collected volumes of *Yoga Rahasya* are published by the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune, distributed in Australia by the BKS Iyengar Association of Australia, and available from iyogaprops.com.au. Bulk copies may be obtained from the Institute: Secretary, RIMYI, 1107 B/1 Hare Krishna Mandir Road, Shivaji Nagar, Pune 411016, INDIA