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## What is an *Âsana*?

to B.K.S. Iyengar, whose teachings are  
an inexhaustible source of inspiration

What is an Asana? This is a question aimed at the core from which and by which an *âsana* is what it is and as it is. It intends a philosophical inquiry into the essence of this yogic discipline. From the old Indian sources through the Yoga literature of our times the question about the essence of *âsana* has attracted astonishingly little attention. The texts are for the most part interested in the way the poses should be performed and which effects they have.

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

1. YS II,46: *sthira sukham âsanam* (posture is to be firm and delightful) is surely not intended as a definition of the essence of *âsana*. Patanjali already presupposes a certain understanding of what an *âsana*, a so called yogic posture is. He does not say what he means by *âsana*, and the essence of it in which the possibility of firmness, happiness and all the other qualities and effects of *âsana* are rooted, is not disclosed. He only describes the way it should be performed. In a similar manner YS II, 47 and 48 define the criteria of perfection in *âsana* and the results of mastering it.

2. One of the rare serious attempts of our days to explain what an *âsana* is was made by M.M. Gore in his "Anatomy and physiology of yogic practises" (Lonavla 21991 p 72-77). "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 a sense of well being. The term asana is also used to indicate a carpet of grass, well tanned deer-hide, a 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 *âsana* is. The core of the matter is not yet touched, because the essential inner process which leads to steadiness of body and mind and a sense of well being is not given.

After this, he criticizes three translations of the term «*âsana*» into English because they do not capture its essential meaning: Asana as posture, pose and exercise.

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 in daily life-postures the state of the mind is not very important for the posture in itself. Most of the time we are not aware of the postures we perform, we develop and maintain them without noticing it while we are attentive to various kinds of thoughts, our tasks and work we have to do. On the contrary "Asana is acquired voluntarily, with full concentration on what and how we are doing it."

Another translation of *âsana* 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 *âsanas* is not an actor who poses to express some feelings.

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. *Âsanas*, on the other hand, are practised 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 *âsanas* which is practised in Lonavla. But even if one takes into account that in the modern schools of Yoga which were inspired by Krishnamachar (Iyengar, Desikachar, Patabhi Jois) dynamic ways of practising were developed which also train the muscular strength of the body, the term "exercise" without further explanation does not convey the peculiar feature of *âsana* which differs from sports and gymnastic exercises.

After the critical discussion of the usual translations of *âsana*, Gore tries to give a new one. He translates and thereby defines *âsana* as "postural pattern". Although this proposal is not bad it is not sufficient for an essential definition of *âsana*. 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 *âsana* is not analyzed. Instead of this Gore -like all the other authors on the subject- immediately turns to describe how it has to be performed and which effects it has.

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

But how should one be able to know how to practise something and how should one understand the effects of practising, if one has no insight concerning its essence? It is true that every attentive practice leads towards an inarticulated familiarity with the essence of whatever is practised. But the articulated question and answer about the essence is nevertheless of great importance because it helps one to avoid wrong ways of practising and points to the deepness of experience, a deepness 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. If the essence of *âsana* is not understood or forgotten senseless and shallow routine starts. Especially the teacher should have a profound and clear 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 92 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 Mr. Iyengar the question which was not answered by the yoga books that I had read: "What is an *âsana*?" He thought it over for a moment and then gave the following concise, philosophical definition:

***Âsana* is a process of posing and reposing through which by balancing its evolutionary and involutionary movement the mind reaches a state of tranquility.**

This statement tries to unveil to some extent the essence of *âsana*. 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 deepness of the yogic experience. I shall give a short commentary by explaining the main terms of the definition.

### **1. *Âsana* is a process.**

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

When looking at the photographs in Yoga books, one tends to think that what can be seen on the picture is identical with the *âsana*. 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 *âsana* is structured. It is answered in the next part of Iyengar's definition.

### **2. *Âsana* is a process of posing and reposing.**

The terms posing and reposing define the peculiar character of the process, which constitutes the essence of *âsana*. Both have their special meaning within Iyengar's *âsana*-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 body as represented by the particular asana being performed." (Tree of Yoga, 54) The word «repose» is used in a quite 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 bones, joints muscles, fibres and cells."(Tree of Yoga, 54-55)

As a combination of posing and reposing carrying out an *âsana* 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 Iyengar 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 *âsana* at the end of the commentary. Before this we must consider the means by which tranquility is gained. What are the principles that guide us to tranquility? And most of all: What is the nature of the process of posing and reposing?

### **3. *Âsana* as posing and reposing is a kind of balancing.**

Iyengar 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. If the bicycle and the cyclist lean towards one side so that they are in danger of losing their balance, 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 a steady and calm movement with a single direction that does not fluctuate..

#### **4. *Âsana* is the balancing of 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 *âsana* as balance has also to define these opposed primary constituents.

In every pose two basic contradictionary tendencies are set in motion which Iyengar 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 their equation is lost. Therefore, the basic task in the process of posing and reposing is to balance involution and evolution.

The meaning of evolution and involution:

Evolution is the movement from the center to the periphery, from the inside to the outside, from the muscles to the skin, from the source of activity into the vastness, the openness of our world. It is connected with effort, fire, sweat and heat which awaken our sleeping powers. Evolution in *âsana* means to bring the stretch to its maximum. One could call it *pravritti marga*, the path of activity within the performance of asana, which is a creation of space that opens the practitioner towards the world. According to Iyengar, this principle also has an analogy in the *yoga s  tras* which describe the first of the two necessary means to gain the restraint of the fluctuations of consciousness as *abhyasa*, or dedicated, steadfast effort (YS 1.13-14)

Involution is the contrary movement from the periphery to the center, from outside to inside, from the skin towards the muscle, from the world towards the self. It is the element of relaxation and surrender within extension. Involution in *âsana* represents what is called in Indian philosophical terms *nivritti marga*, the path of cessation as opposed to the path of activity, *pravritti marga*. Regarding the *yoga s  tras* this element corresponds to *vairagya*, freedom from desires, detachment (YS 1. 15-16) With concern to the practice of *âsana*, involution is a more inner and hidden movement than the evolutionary one.

In one of his talks Iyengar gives a practical example for this principle: "Stretch your hand. You say "oh, I feel my finger has gotten 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 practise, although it appears to you external, I am a *vairagyi* inside."(70 glorious Years, 215)

Both tendencies of movement, the evolutionary and the involutionary 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 center 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" Iyengar compares the twofolded movement of evolution/involution with the movement of life within a tree: "In practising âsanas, 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 through the branches and the stem to the root, and the root makes the tree grow further to produce the blossom, fruits and flowers." (Tree, 116)

### **5. The aim of Âsana as balancing involution and evolution is tranquility of the mind.**

If evolution and involution, *abhasya* and *vairagya*, *pravritti marga* and *nivritti marga* are balanced within the pose a new quality of awareness emerges. The practitioner now is 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 center of the moving entity but reveals it.

Therefore, tranquility is not a boring emptiness wherein nothing happens but the peak experience of abundance and vitality connected with a stability and centeredness which keep the practitioner in steady touch with her/his inner self. 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 desires vanish as we feel an inner abundance which has no end.