Chapter 2 – Asanas

There is something of a paradox here. The teaching and practice of asanas (yoga postures) is a huge worldwide phenomenon. It has moved over into the mainstream of the physical fitness industry, with numerous kinds of aerobic and extreme yoga regimens now available. This is big business!

Yet, in the overall scheme of traditional yoga, asanas are only one limb out of eight, with meditation, pranayama and the other limbs having equal or greater weight. Not to mention the important tri-limbed practice of samyama, which expands the influence of inner silence in all aspects of life.

Why the difference between the basic truths of full scope yoga practice and what we see going on in the world? Some say it is "market driven." We are a culture that craves physical health above all things. It is understandable. We all want our health and well-being, the more the better.

But learning to systematically do less can be much more, you know. That is the secret of yoga. In the AYP approach to yoga practices we use asanas primarily as a limbering, a stretching of the nervous system to warm up for spinal breathing pranayama, deep meditation and other *sitting practices*.

Postures - An Important Limb of Yoga

Asanas, or physical postures, are important in any approach to yoga, no matter where we have started – with pranayama, with meditation, with devotional activity, or even with studies of the philosophical side of yoga. Of course, these days, many people start with asanas, so it is very often not a case of adding asana practice, but adding the rest of yoga! Either

way, we will be wise to consider the full range of practices available from the ancient wisdom of yoga in order to achieve the best results. This does not mean adding more and more yoga postures and time duration until the time we are doing postures each day runs into hours, squeezing everything else out. It is a much more refined, balanced and efficient process of yoga we are seeking.

What we will find is that if we develop a range of both postures and sitting practices step-by-step in a well-integrated way, then each part can be kept to a reasonable time with *increased effectiveness* of the overall routine. With that, we can accomplish more with less, and still have plenty of time to go out into our daily activities and enjoy the benefits. That is the payoff for any kind of yoga practice, yes? Enhancement in the quality of our life, as we choose to live it.

The approach suggested in this book is two short sets of asanas each day, morning and evening, followed by our sitting practices, which include spinal breathing pranayama, deep meditation, samyama, mudras and bandhas (covered in the next chapter), and other techniques.

The fact that yoga postures have caught on with the public cannot be denied. Much good comes from it. It doesn't matter which limb of yoga caught on first. All the limbs of yoga are connected. If we do asanas, we will be drawn to pranayama and meditation eventually. If we do meditation, we will be drawn to asanas eventually. That is how it goes. Our nervous system knows a good thing when it sees it. Wake up the nervous system a little and it wants more. All of the limbs of yoga are expressions of the

natural ways that our nervous system opens to divine experience.

Our nervous system determines the practices, not the other way around. Practices come to us when we need them. It is amazing how this happens. It is the power of our desire for evolution that brings knowledge to us. When this desire is sustained, it is called *bhakti*. In time, all of the practices come together automatically. We just have to give a nudge here and there. That is the power of bhakti.

We live in a world where human experience is based mainly on physicality. Our senses are yet to be drawn inward to the point where inner experiences will become as real (or more real) than experiences in the external world. So we are always looking for a physical solution. Yoga asanas begin to take us from physicality to more subtle experiences of divine energy in the nervous system. This is why asanas are so relaxing. It is their main draw. People do asanas for relaxation, for some inner peace. Yoga asanas are very good for that. They are also very good for preparing the body and mind for pranayama and meditation. This is the way we will look at asanas here – as a preparation in our daily routine for pranayama and meditation.

There are exceptions to the "relaxing" mode of asanas. Nowadays, you can go take a class in power yoga, aerobic yoga, and get a good workout. That is okay. It is not suggested for right before pranayama and meditation though. We are going the other way when we go into sitting practices, to less activity in the nervous system, not more. So we do our aerobic activities after our yoga routine, not right before it.

The physical conditioning aspect of life is not ignored here – it is very important, especially for

those whose ecstatic energies have been awakened. For a yoga-friendly routine of muscle toning calisthenics and aerobic (cardiovascular) development, see the appendix at the end of the book.

Asanas in the traditional sense are for quieting the nervous system. But more than that. They are designed to facilitate the flow of *prana* (life force) in the body, particularly in the *sushumna*, which is the central spinal nerve. So you can see that asanas are a natural preparation for pranayama, particularly spinal breathing pranayama.

Asanas are part of a broader system of primarily physical yoga called *hatha yoga*. In hatha yoga, there are also the mudras and bandhas, which are targeted approaches to moving prana in the body. There is an Indian scripture called the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* that covers both asanas and mudras and bandhas. Many of the physical yoga practices in use today can be found in this ancient book. The practices can be found in other systems as well, such as in *kundalini yoga* and in *tantra yoga*. Many systems of yoga utilize asanas, mudras and bandhas. There is a lot of overlap. Everyone wants to lay claim to a good thing.

It all comes down to what works, and each system of yoga is seeking to achieve best results in its own way. That is the mission of AYP also, except it is open to the general public, rather than reserved for a few selected practitioners.

Hatha yoga means "joining of the sun and the moon" – joining the masculine and feminine energies within us. We run into this theme in every tradition, because it is an essential characteristic of an evolving human nervous system. In India it is also known as the joining of the metaphorical Kundalini-Shakti and Shiva within us. Kundalini-Shakti is the ecstatic

aspect of our inner functioning, awakened by asanas, mudras, bandhas and pranayama, while Shiva represents the emergence of blissful inner silence within us, awakened in deep meditation and samyama. The Taoists represent this duality with Yin and Yang. The Christians call them the Holy Spirit and God the Father. And so on…

No matter what tradition we find ourselves in, the operation of the nervous system will be the same as it evolves to higher stages of functioning. Only the names may be different.

As they say, "A rose is still a rose by any other name."

There is some overlap between asanas and the mudras and bandhas. Some yoga practices keep the name *asana;* others might carry the name *mudra* or *bandha*. Whatever we call them, they are physical practices facilitating the movement of prana and blissful inner silence within us. So, when you see *yoga mudra* and *maha mudra* in the asana list, and *siddhasana* in the mudra and bandha list, do not be surprised. Such overlaps are not uncommon. The most important thing is that we are applying these methods in the most effective manner in relation to the sequence and duration of our practices.

Asana Starter Kit

There are many ways to learn how to do asanas (classes, videos, books), and many styles out there to choose from. Here in this book, we will make it very easy. We are going to introduce fourteen simple postures to do before our sitting practices. *Simple* is a good place to start, yes? We will call it our *Asana Starter Kit*.

No doubt there will be some who want more.

Plenty more is available. With thousands of yoga teachers around the world, and dozens of systems of practice, the possibilities for yoga posture training are practically endless.

Our goal here is to establish a phase-in for our sitting practices of spinal breathing pranayama, meditation, and so on. For those who are looking for a place to start with asanas, this book can suffice. It will be very simple.

Surely many reading here will already have a class in yoga asanas under their belt – maybe a lot of classes. That is good. Taking a yoga class is highly recommended, as long as it is the slow and easy variety of asanas that are conducive for pranayama and meditation right afterward. See the appendix for a discussion of aerobic exercise.

For those who are into yoga postures already, this will be a review, and perhaps even a *toning down* from an expanding routine of postures that may take an increasingly large chunk of time out of the day. It has been found to be much more effective to add sitting practices at the end of a modest asana routine than to keep increasing the asana routine without the addition of sitting practices. In fact, the asana routine can be shortened, while increasing the overall effect with a combined routine involving sitting practices.

There are many ways to approach it, depending on one's background, training and inclination. But one thing is for sure. Asanas, pranayama and meditation, in balanced proportion time-wise, make a far more effective routine of practice than asanas alone. So that is the angle we are coming from here.

With that, let's take a look at the basic asana routine. The routine can be done in about ten minutes