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**PRAYATNAŚAITHILYA IN THE PRACTICE OF YOGĀSANA :
A CRITICAL REVIEW BASED ON TRADITIONAL COMMENTARIES
OF YOGASŪTRAS**

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ABSTRACT

Āsana is a very important feature of Yoga. The correct way of performing āsana will assist not only in preparing a sadhaka for higher practices of yoga but will also help in a better assessment of efficacy of these practices in alleviating various ailments. The Yoga literature has many references regarding the proper performance of Yogic practices. With regard to āsanās, the Yogasūtras (Prayatnaśaithilyānantasamāpattibhyām - Chapter 2 Sūtra 47) of patañjali says that the twin methods of Prayatnaśaithilya and Anantasamāpatti help the proper practice of āsanās. This article focuses on the first among the two methods mentioned above, i.e. Prayatnaśaithilya. The term generally means 'slackening of effort'. Is it possible to attain a firm and comfortable posture by slackening effort? This article is an attempt to address this question by consulting the traditional Sanskrit commentaries and sub-commentaries of Yogasūtras. After analysing the views of the commentaries of Yogasūtras it is stated that Prayatnaśaithilya is a process which is essential before practicing āsana, while practicing āsana and after reaching the prescribed position of the posture.

Keywords: Āsana, sthira, sukha, prayatnaśaithilya, traditional commentators

Introduction

Āsana is considered as an important part of Yoga. It is also the most popular limb among the aṣṭāṅga-s (eight limbs of Yoga). According to Yogasūtra-s āsana-s are those postures of the body which are firm (sthira) and comfortable (sukha)¹. Yoga texts speak about the benefits of āsana-s. The Yogasūtra-s² say that through the practice of āsana, one overcomes the pair of opposites (like pleasure and pain, heat and cold etc). The hathayogapradīpikā³ says that "āsana

1 Sthiram sukhamāsanam - 2.46

2 tato dvandvānabhighātaḥ - 2.48

3 Kuryāt tadāsanam sthairyam ārogyam cāṅgalāghavam - 1.17

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Rest 1 min.
IN hale - Throat, Mouth (cheeked up
midly)
then chant 'Om' lowering the head

bestows steadiness, health and lightness in limbs." Furthermore, Jyotsnā (commentary on Hathayogapradīpikā by Brahmānanda) states that āsana-s keep the Rajas and Tamas in the body under control⁴.

Āsana is also an integral part of yoga therapy, which is currently considered as an important complementary system of healing. Hence, for spiritual progress and also for health and wellbeing āsana-s are considered essential. It is a matter of common understanding that āsana-s need to be practiced in the proper manner to obtain the intended benefits from them.

In the wake of research studies undertaken worldwide to assess the impact of various yogic practices on diverse health conditions, an understanding of the proper way of practicing the yogic limbs, like āsana, becomes necessary.

Proper practice of āsana

The Yoga literature, classical and modern, has many references regarding the proper performance of Yogic practices. Hathayogapradīpikā details the place for practice⁵ of yoga. It also describes about the disciplines like celibacy that are to be maintained during the practice of āsana and the food⁶ that is to be consumed by a practitioner of āsana-s. Modern teachers⁷ also have laid emphasis on the precautions that are essential and the methods that are to be followed to practice āsana-s.

With regard to proper practice of āsana-s, the Yogasūtra-s⁸ of Patañjali says that the twin methods of ⁹Prayatnaśaithilya and Anantasamāpatti are helpful.

The problem and its significance

There are not many studies which have accorded exhaustive treatment to the above mentioned

4 dehasya rajodharmanāśakatvena sthīratām kuryāt....tamodharmanāśakatvamapyetenoktam – 1.17

5 1.12, 1.13

6 1.57 – 63

7 Yoga cikitsa (p.24), Swami Kuvalayananda and Dr. S.L. Vinekar Kendriya Svāsthya Śikṣā Bureau, Delhi, 1971

The careful construction of Yoga Practice, p.26, The Heart of Yoga, T.K.V. Desikachar, Inner Traditions, Delhi, 1995

Hints and cautions for the practice of asana-s, Light on Yoga, B.K.S. Iyengar, Harper Collins, Delhi, 2009

8 Prayatnaśaithilyānantasamāpattibhyām - 2.47

9 The translation of the two terms has not been given because, that is the subject of this paper.

views of Patañjali. There is also a view¹⁰ that even in those places where these two methods of Patañjali are discussed the presentation is not unambiguous and practical. This necessitated the current study. The views expressed by Patañjali on this important issue merits attention because

- The views regarding the proper practice of āsana-s present in text of Hathayoga and the works of contemporary teachers have been presented above. However, Yogasūtra-s is regarded as the primary text on the principles and practices of Yoga. All later expostions on yoga have derived ideas from the Yogasūtra-s Hence, the study of the views expressed in Yogasūtra-s assumes significance.
- Currently, Yoga practices including āsana-s are being critically¹¹ viewed in the public domain for their validity in amelioration of various health issues. Hence studies that might throw light on the methods of proper practice of āsana-s are essential.

Among the two methods stated by Patañjali, this article focuses more on the first, i.e. Prayatnaśaithilya, the apparently more enigmatic method of the two. Prayatna in Sanskrit is effort and Śaithilya, generally, is slackening. The term then means 'slackening of effort'. To achieve any objective, generally, it is advised that one should strive hard or put in great effort. It is surprising to note here that to achieve the prescribed state in āsana one has to slacken effort.

Is it possible to attain a firm and comfortable posture by slackening effort?

Such a question that arises while trying to understand Prayatnaśaithilya might be one of the reasons for this important concept being presented in various ways. The present study analyses this method of practice of āsana, based on the classical Sanskrit commentaries. The second method anantasamāpatti has also been presented in this study briefly.

Insights from Traditional Commentaries

Grammatically, the compound word Prayatnaśaithilyānantasamāpattibhyām in the Yogasūtra-s is in instrumental case (tr̥tīyā-vibhakti/instrumental case). It means Prayatnaśaithilya and Anantasamāpatti are instrumental in making āsana - sthira and sukha. This would mean that Prayatnaśaithilya is one of the two methods by which a practitioner achieves Sthira and Sukha āsana. This fixes the scope of interpretation of the term.

10 Georg Feuerstein (The Yogasūtra of Patañjali, A new translation and commentary, 1989, p.91) opines that "All kind of fanciful explanations have been proposed for this aphorism."

11 How yoga can wreck your body, Magazine, New York times, January 5, 2012, hyper link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/magazine/how-yoga-can-wreck-your-body.html?pagewanted=all>

1) Vyāsa-s View

Vyāsa, the principal commentator on Yogasūtra-s, says -
"By slackening of effort, success in āsana is achieved.
By this trembling in the limbs (of the body) is avoided."¹²

Notes

Here Vyāsa indicates that by Prayatnaśaithilya aṅgamejaya (trembling in the limbs of the body) is avoided. When there is no aṅgamejaya the body becomes sthira and sukha. Though Vyāsa makes an important contribution by presenting the mechanism of working of Prayatnaśaithilya (by stating that it helps avoid aṅgamejaya and hence leads to Sthira āsana), the questions 'where should one slacken the effort' and 'how should it be done' are not elaborated. This aspect requires further search.

2) Vācaspati Miśra's Views

Vācaspati Miśra, a scholar who has written texts in almost every school of Indian philosophy, elaborately discussed the topic in his work Tattvavaiśārādī¹³. His views are as follows -

The natural effort (of an individual) that holds body (in balance in various postures¹⁴) is not the cause for the āsana which is one among the limbs of yoga. If that is the cause for āsana then, there would be no use in giving instructions on āsana, since it is naturally attained. (That posture which is attained naturally need not be taught). So, the natural effort of the body to hold itself is not the means to āsana and it is even adverse to āsana. Being unprompted, those natural efforts to attain postures have no rules and hence they (natural efforts) break the rules that are laid down (in the texts) to attain (yogic) postures. Hence, a person who has embarked upon practicing āsana-s as per instructions (in the yoga texts) should put in such efforts, which constitutes the slackening of the natural effort (of the body to hold itself in various casual positions). In no other way success in āsana is attained. Hence slackening of natural effort is the cause/means for success in āsana.¹⁵

12 'प्रयत्नोपरमात् सिद्ध्यत्यासनं, येन न अङ्गमेजयो भवति।'

13 A sub-commentary to Vyāsa's commentary

14 Posture here does not mean āsana-s. It simply means normal postures like sitting, standing etc.

15 सांसिद्धिको हि प्रयत्नः शरीरधारकः न योगाङ्गस्य उपदेष्टव्यासनस्य कारणम्। तस्य तत्कारणत्वे उपदेशवैर्य्यात्, स्वरसत एव तत्सिद्धेः। तस्मात् उपदेष्टव्यासनस्य असाधको विरोधी च स्वाभाविकः प्रयत्नः, तस्य च यादृच्छिकासनहेतुतया आसननियमोपहन्तृत्वात्। तस्मादुपदिष्टनियमासनमभ्यस्यता स्वाभाविकप्रयत्नशैथिल्यात्मा प्रयत्नः आस्थेयः। नान्यथा उपदिष्टमासनं सिद्ध्यतीति स्वाभाविकप्रयत्नशैथिल्यम् आसनसिद्धिहेतुः।

Notes

The detailed exposition of the commentator provides the following insights - Prayatnaśaithilya is not relaxing into the āsana. Nor can it be stated that Prayatnaśaithilya means - 'initially āsana practice is strenuous and in course of time one gets used to the practice and hence can relax in the posture.' He clearly states that the body should not be allowed to make casual/natural efforts in the course of practice. In a way it means strictly adhering to the prescribed steps.

On reflection one understands that natural/casual effort harms the body. Those postures in which a human being fixes his body on his own (while sitting etc) initially seem to be comfortable. But after a time, the spine, neck and the back get hurt and hence he keeps shifting the position. This explanation clearly shows that if one does not '*cease the natural efforts*' his āsana will neither be sthira or sukha. Hence in the view of Vācaspati Miśra Prayatnaśaithilya is the slackening or cessation of natural or casual effort of the body.

3) Vijñānabhikṣu's view

Vijñānabhikṣu, the author of Yoga-vārtika¹⁶ states the following regarding Prayatnaśaithilya - *If after doing a lot of (other) work one sets out to practice āsana, the limbs of the body start trembling and one does not attain firmness in āsana - This is the view (of Vyāsa).*¹⁷

Notes

Vijñānabhikṣu's comments are brief. But they seem to explicitly explain the concept. The question - how Prayatnaśaithilya averts aṅgamejaya is succinctly answered here. The very nature of āsana is described as that which is firm and comfortable. But that firmness cannot be achieved if one indulges in a lot of (other) works before the practice of āsana. One will end up having trembling limbs. So, to attain sthira and as a result sukha āsana one has to avoid doing a lot of (other) works before the practice of āsana. So, according to the view of Vijñānabhikṣu slackening

16 A sub-commentary to Vyāsa's commentary

17 बहुव्यापारानन्तरं चेदासनं क्रियते तदाङ्गकम्पनादासनस्थैर्यं न भवतीत्याशयः

of effort in doing a lot of work before the practice of āsana is Prayatnaśaithilya.

4) Śaṅkara's view

Śaṅkara, the author of Vivaraṇa says¹⁸ -

*After getting fixed in āsana, not doing any further effort leads to success(in āsana.)*¹⁹

Notes

Śaṅkara gives a new angle to the topic under discussion. Various efforts are taken to achieve a particular āsana. For example, let us consider Padmāsana. The legs are crossed and placed above the two thighs. The body, neck and head held straight etc. After reaching this posture, Śaṅkara, opines that one should not do any further effort or unnecessary movements. One should keep his body still in that posture. This will help in making the āsana Sthira (firm) and Sukha (comfortable). Hence slackening effort or cessation of movement after attaining the prescribed posture is Prayatna Śaithilya in the view of Śaṅkara.

5) Sadāśiva Brahmendra's Views

Sadāśiva Brahmendra, the great Yogin, in his independent gloss on Yogasūtra-s called Yogasudhākara, has this to say about Prayatnaśaithilya -

*Prayatnaśaithilya is a worldly method for (attaining) that (āsana). Eagerness in mind to wander, to do household chores, to go on pilgrimage and bathe in sacred tanks and other acts is Prayatna. This has to be curbed (Śaithilya). Or else this eagerness will - forcibly make the body rise (from āsana) and involve it in some other activity (other than āsana).*²⁰

Notes

This again is a new interpretation for the topic under discussion. Four commentators above had opined that Prayatna refers to the effort of the body and hence Prayatnaśaithilya is at the physical level. But Sadāśiva Brahmendra himself a Yogin, states that Prayatna is the mental eagerness to get involved in various external actions. Śaithilya -curbing or slackening of this is essential to continue uninterruptedly in the practice of āsana. He also says that this is a worldly

18 A sub-commentary to Vyāsa's commentary

19 आसनबन्धोत्तरकालं प्रयत्नाकरणात् वा सिद्ध्यति।

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6) Hariharānanda-Araṇya's Views

Hariharānanda-arāṇya who has written a sub-commentary called Bhāsvatī on Vyāsa -s commentary states- *A person who is doing āsana-s like padmāsana should put in effort in actions such as keeping the three upper parts of his body (back, head and neck) erect. He should slacken his effort elsewhere (in actions other than this). Staying (still) as if dead, indeed, is Prayatnaśaithilya.*²²

Notes

Hariharānanda-arāṇya has contributed a word 'anya' (other) in this context to add clarity. He suggests that one should slacken efforts in actions other than those that are essential for the success of āsana. Being a recent commentary chronologically, in a way, the view of Hariharānanda-arāṇya seems to sum up the views of all the commentators stated above. To explain — Efforts that are 'other' (anya) than those that are required for the practice of āsana include natural and casual efforts stated by Vacaspati, a lot of physical work before the practice of āsana as mentioned by Vijñānabhikṣu, unnecessary movements after reaching the prescribed position in the āsana as mentioned by Śaṅkara. It seems, avoidance of these 'other' (anya) efforts is Prayatnaśaithilya in the view of Hariharānanda-arāṇya. The commentator might also have also implied another meaning. If a person focusses only on those efforts that are essential for the practice of āsana, other non-essential actions cease on their own (Prayatnaśaithilya happens on its own). This implied meaning is supported by the elaboration made by Hariharānanda-arāṇya (in the passage quoted above) on the necessary or essential efforts for the practice of Padmāsana as an illustration.

Analysis

The views of six Sanskrit commentaries, presented above, give rich information about the concept under discussion. The views of the commentators mentioned above do not seem to

21 Anantasamāpatti in his view is meditating oneself as the great 'Ananta (the great divine serpent that holds the earth by its thousand hoods)'. By this the divine serpents blessings are attained which contributes to the success in āsana

22 पचासनादिगतः त्रिरुन्नतस्थापनाप्रयत्नात् अन्यप्रयत्नशैथिल्यं कुर्यात् इत्यर्थः मृतवत् स्थितिरेव प्रयत्नशैथिल्यम्।

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contradict each other. Rather, they complement each other in the emergence of a complete picture of the topic under consideration. The comments of Vacaspati, Vijñānabhikṣu, Śaṅkara and Sadāśiva Brahmendra have qualified the term or presented new interpretations to the term Prayatna. Vyāsa's comments present the mechanism of how Prayatnaśaithilya leads to sthira asana by cessation of aṅgamejaya. Hariharānanda-aranya has also contributed by, stressing (by implication) the importance of focussing on the essential efforts for success in asana.

All the insights that are obtained from the commentaries are not mutually exclusive. Hence all these aspects can be sequentially arranged as follows -

1. Before the practice of asana the practitioner should avoid a lot of other works (Vijñānabhikṣu).
2. During the practice of asana the practitioner should focus on the steps that are essential (Hariharānanda-aranya) and avoid natural movements of the body (Vacaspati) during the practice of āsana and resist the eagerness that rises in the mind to get up from GHsana and indulge in other activities (Sadāśiva Brahmendra).
3. After reaching the posture the practitioner should keep the body still (Śaṅkara).

How Does such Prayatnaśaithilya Help ?

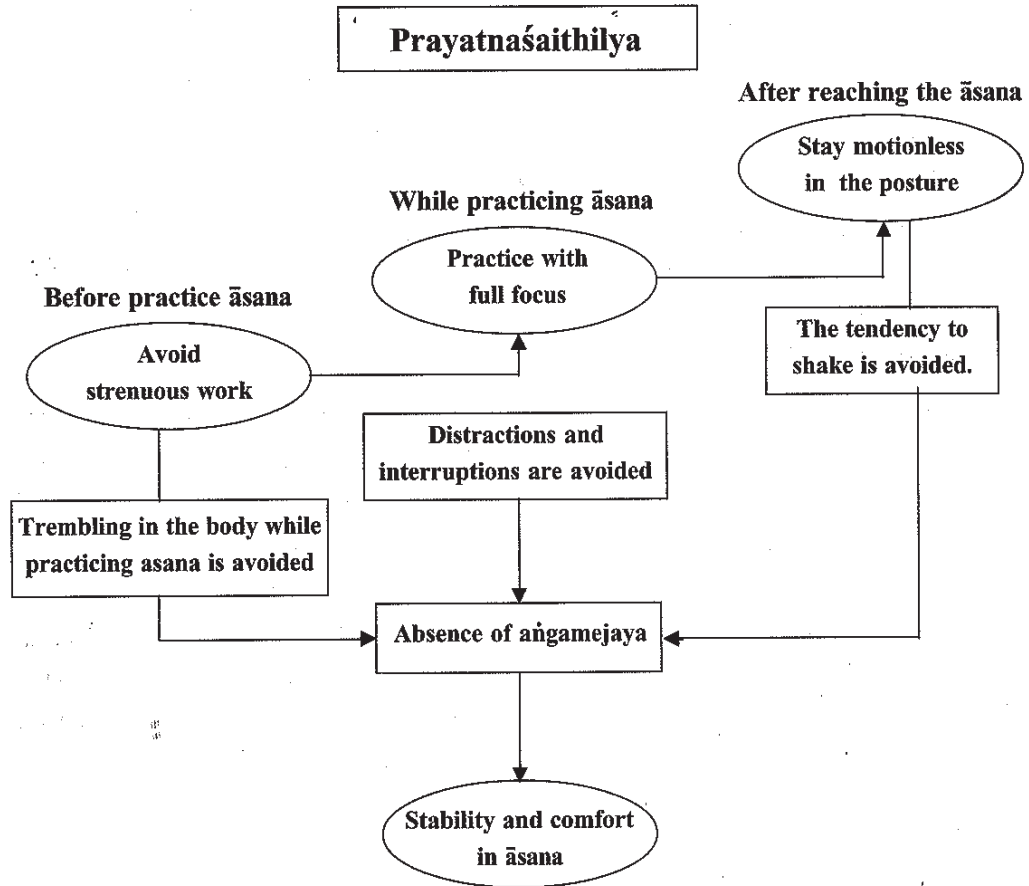
As stated by Vyāsa Prayatnaśaithilya helps by preventing aṅgamejaya. This manifests in the three stages of Prayatnaśaithilya stated above. It can be elaborated as follows -

1) A person who has embarked upon the practice of āsana should avoid - strenuous efforts. Non-avoidance of these may lead to aṅgamejaya (trembling of the limbs) during the practice of āsana that destabilizes the body.

2) Prayatnaśaithilya, which is scrupulousness in following the steps of āsana and vigilance to keep unnecessary eagerness of the mind at bay bestows the practitioner focus and absence of restlessness. A person who is focused and is not restless continues the practice of āsana in an uninterrupted manner. Only an uninterrupted practice will be stable (sthira). The interrupted Practice may lead to aṅgamejaya.

3) After reaching the posture if a person does not mind to keep his limbs motionless then an unnecessary tendency to move the limbs will set in and will lead to aṅgamejaya. On the other hand Prayatnaśaithilya which is keeping the body still after reaching the prescribed posture, leads to firmness in postures. Firmness, as understood generally, is not keeping oneself tight and rigid or freezing in a position. Such a firmness will not lead to comfort. Firmness can be

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systematically achieved through the steps mentioned above. Such firmness which is attained thus makes the body comfortable (Sukha). The idea stated above is schematically given - A Word On Anantasamāpatti²³

Prayatnaśaithilya has been dealt in detail in the section above. Since the author of Yogasūtras has mentioned Anantasamāpatti along with this, it would only be proper to briefly discuss that here which might help to provide a complete picture. But the term Ananta-samapatti is also equally difficult to interpret. Ananta is interpreted variously

²³ Only the summary of the views are presented on this topic. Anantasamāpatti also merits a detailed discussion.

by commentators. It can be summed up as follows

- a) Ananta is Śeṣanāga (the serpent called śeṣa), Nāganāyaka (king among the serpents)
- b) Ananta or ānantya is endless vast expanse like the ether or the vast world or anything that is illimitably vast.

When the mind gets immersed/absorbed (samāpatti) in such 'ananta' success in āsana ensues. Here too, the 'how of it' needs to be addressed. If Ananta is Śeṣanāga – Vijñānabhikṣu states that Meditating upon him

- a) helps in securing his blessing
- b) Is a way of visualizing oneself (the practitioner) similar (sajātīyabhāvanā) to that of Ananta, the serpent, who himself is in a firm āsana though supporting the entire universe on his thousand hoods.²⁴ Since thoughts influence actions, visualizations such as this help to attain firm and comfortable āsana.
- c) Gives unseen merits (adṛṣṭa/ puṇya) that leads to success in āsana

If Ananta is taken to mean vast expanse like the sky, then, Bhoja,²⁵ states that- in the course of practicing āsana, if a person directs his mind to the vastness and makes it get absorbed in that, then the identity of oneself with the body ceases and thus the feeling of physical strain of performing the āsana ceases, which makes āsana comfortable.

Summary and Conclusion

Based on the above discussion the twin practices of Prayatnaśaithilya and Anantasamāpatti can be presented as follows

- a) Worldly And Divine Methods

Prayatnaśaithilya is the worldly method by being mindful and avoiding non-essential efforts of the body before or while practicing āsana. Anantasamāpatti is the divine method which complements/supports/strengthens this human effort by assisting to secure blessing from the divine or accruing unseen (adṛṣṭa)merit.

24 Anugrahād vā sajātīyabhāvanāvaśād vā adṛṣṭavaśād vā

25 Bhoja in his commentary on Yogasūtra-s states – yadā ākāś ādigate ānantye cetasaḥ samāpattiḥ kriyate avyavahānena tādātmyamāpadyte tadā dehāhaṅkāraḥ bhāvāt nāsanam duḥkhaśāntaḥ bhavati| The views of Bhoja on Prayatnaśaithilya is not stated because his views agree to that of vijñānabhikṣu. The view of other commentators such as Bhāvagaṇeśa, Nāgoji Bhaṭṭa

b) Physical And Mental Methods

Going by the view of commentators other than Sadaśiva Brahmendra, if PrayatnaĀithilya is taken to mean avoiding unnecessary physical effort, it can be classified as the physical method and Anantasamāpatti which is getting absorbed into the endless expanse or meditating upon Śeṣanāga becomes mental method. Thus these two together, discipline the physical and mental realms of human body and lead them to success in āsana.

The above discussion on the term Prayatnaśaithilya based on the classical commentaries provide explanation on the seemingly enigmatic topic. Effort has been made to consult all available Sanskrit commentaries on Yogasūtra-s. These commentaries have clearly brought out the line of thought of the Sūtra-s. On the present topic, all the commentators have not only adhered to the grammatical framework and context of interpretation of the term but were also able to bring out various shades of practicable meanings. Such disciplined yet insightful interpretation of classical commentators on fundamental yogic concepts such as PrayatnaĀithilya need to be understood and internalized in the interest of effective practice and teaching of Yog. This is essential in the wake of emergence of divergent methods of imparting Yogic wisdom in the present world to an ever widening audience worldwide.

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