

Official Publication of  
Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana University

IJOY-PPP

Vol. 1 | Issue 2 | July-December, 2013

# International Journal Of Yoga Philosophy, Psychology and Parapsychology



ISSN: 0000-0000

# Anantasamāpatti – A technique prescribed by Patañjali for the practice of āsana: An analysis of traditional literature

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Āsana is an important constituent of Yoga. The impact of Anantasamāpatti, a technique for the practice of āsana prescribed by patañjali, in the practice of Yogāsana remains to be scientifically assessed. Scientific verification presupposes conceptual clarity. A cursory survey of contemporary interpretations reveals that Anantasamāpatti has been represented variously. **Objectives and Method:** In the light of this contemporary uncertainty, effort is made to refer to and analyse the traditional view point which is preserved in the form of Sanskrit commentaries regarding the meaning and mechanism of working of this technique to assist better understanding and implementation of this most ancient technique in the practice of Yogāsana. **Result:** Contemporary uncertainty regarding Anantasamāpatti seems to stem from traditional sources. **Conclusion:** Based on the literary evidences Ananta is the probable reading and the meaning seems to be Śeṣa. Samāpatti is visualization of oneself as firm and strong like Śeṣa. The mechanism of working seems to be the effect of the mental visualization on physical firmness. And this requires to be practiced along with prayantaśaithilya.

**Key words:** Anantasamāpatti, āsana, technique, traditional commentaries

## INTRODUCTION

Āsana is an important constituent of Yoga. The role of āsana as a therapeutic tool has been and is being actively evaluated worldwide. Yogasūtras of Patañjali, the earliest codified treatise on yoga, presents twin techniques for practice of āsana namely Prayatnaśaithilya and Anantasamāpatti.<sup>[1]</sup> This paper<sup>[2]</sup> discusses the second technique Anantasamāpatti.

In this era of scientific validation of Yogic practices, it is to be noted that the impact of Prayatnaśaithilya and Anantasamāpatti in the practice of Yogāsana remains to be assessed. Scientific verification presupposes

conceptual clarity. It has been observed that the sūtra that mentions Anantasamāpatti has “fanciful interpretations.”<sup>[3]</sup>

A cursory survey of contemporary interpretations of Yogasūtra reveals that the term Ananta that forms part of Anantasamāpatti has been represented as (a) Infinity,<sup>[4]</sup> (b) self,<sup>[5]</sup> (c) Prāëa,<sup>[6]</sup> (d) Kuëðaliné-çakti,<sup>[7]</sup> and (e) Çeña, the king of serpents.<sup>[8]</sup> As a consequence, the technique and its implementation have also been presented variously.

In the light of this contemporary uncertainty, effort is made in this paper to refer to the traditional view point which is preserved in the form of Sanskrit commentaries regarding the meaning and mechanism of working of this technique to assist better understanding and implementation of this most ancient technique in the practice of āsana effectively. To this end, views from 10<sup>[9]</sup> Sanskrit commentaries of the Yogasūtra are presented and analyzed.

### Access this article online

Website:  
www.ijoyppp.in

DOI:  
10.4103/2347-5633.157895

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## TRADITIONAL SOURCES

The Yogasūtra commentaries took up for discussion in this paper range from 350 CE to 1800 CE.<sup>[10]</sup> Some of these are direct commentaries upon the Yogasūtra while some others are sub-commentaries to Vyāsa's commentary (Vyāsa is considered the principal or earliest commentator on Yogasūtra<sup>[11]</sup>). The views in these commentaries are presented in the order of chronology.

- Vyāsa (350-400 CE): Or/and the mind that has attained Samāpatti<sup>[12]</sup> in Ananta produces the posture<sup>[13]</sup>
- Vācaspati Miśra<sup>[14]</sup> (850-950 CE): Or/and the mind that attains Samāpatti in king of serpents who, with his very firm thousand hoods, is holding the universe, produces āsana<sup>[15]</sup>
- Bhoja (1050 CE):<sup>[16]</sup> When the mind focuses on the infiniteness of ākāṣa and such other things and attains identity with it, then since the identification with the body does not exist, the practice of āsana will not be painful<sup>[17]</sup>
- Ṣaṅkara (1401-1500 CE):<sup>[18]</sup> Ananta refers to the universe. The state of being ananta is ānantya. The mind that attains Samāpatti on that becomes pervasive and attains the state of (vastness of) the universe, produces the posture, makes it firm<sup>[19]</sup>
- Vijñānabhikṣu<sup>[20]</sup> (1550 CE): Even if one does strenuous work before the practice of āsana, when the mind attains Samāpatti, practicing Dhāraṇā (fixing the mind) and gets merged into the form of the most firm Ṣeṇānāga who sustains the earth (on his hood), āsana is produced. It may be due to the blessing of Ananta or due to the (effect of) visualization of homogeneity or due to some unseen (merit)<sup>[21]</sup>
- Rāmānanda (1550-1600 CE):<sup>[22]</sup> When the mind practices Samāpatti in Ananta who is the head of the serpents, who is firmly holding the universe with thousand hoods, the identification with body ceases and through that pain due to practice of āsana does not shoot up and hence success in āsana is attained<sup>[23]</sup>
- Bhāvagaēṣa (1600-1700 CE):<sup>[24]</sup> Anantasamāpatti is practicing Dhāraṇā (fixing the mind) in the firmest serpent Ṣeṇā who holds the earth<sup>[25]</sup>
- Nārāyaṇatīrtha (1600-1700 CE):<sup>[26]</sup> The views of Nārāyaṇatīrtha are identical to the views of Vijñānabhikṣu<sup>[27]</sup>
- Nāgojibhaōōa (1700-1750 CE):<sup>[28]</sup> The views of Nāgojibhaōōa are identical to the views of Bhāvagaēṣa<sup>[29]</sup>
- Sadāṣivabrahmendra (1700-1800 CE):<sup>[30]</sup> Ananta is the one who holds the universe by his thousand hoods. Meditating that "I am Ananta" is Samāpatti. By this, unseen merit is accrued that will lead to success in āsana.<sup>[31]</sup>

## OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

A noteworthy point made by Vyāsa is - *it is the mind (involved in the practice of Anantasamāpatti) that produces the posture (cittam nirvartayati)*. This clearly hints that *Anantasamāpatti* is the activity of the mind. This fixes the scope of interpretation of the term. All the sub-commentators and independent commentators follow this view of Vyāsa and treat Anantasamāpatti as a mental technique for attaining perfection in āsana. This is one commonality among all the commentators regarding this technique. However, there are many aspects of divergences. They can be classified under four heads:

- Ananta or Ānantya
- Samāpatti
- The mechanism of working of Anantasamāpatti
- Is Anantasamāpatti optional?

### Ananta and Ānantya

Anantasamāpatti is a compound word. The first member of the compound is Ananta. The commentaries presented above indicate the existence of various readings and meanings for the first member of the compound. The same is tabulated in Table 1.

- From Table 1, the views of the commentators can be grouped under two heads: (a) Ananta - Vyāsa, Vācaspati Miśra, Vijñānabhikṣu, Rāmānanda, Bhāvagaēṣa, Nārāyaṇatīrtha, Nāgojibhaōōa, and Sadāṣivabrahmendra and (b) Ānantya - Bhoja and Ṣaṅkara
- Though Vyāsa presents the reading as Ananta, it is only later that the meaning of the term Ṣeṇā emerges (Vācaspati Miśra)
- Bhoja is the first among the commentators to propound the meaning of the term Ānantya. Except one (Ṣaṅkara), all later commentaries (consulted for this paper) accept the views of Vācaspati Miśra, including Sadāṣivabrahmendra who is considered an advaitin in the tradition of Ṣaṅkara
- Though Bhoja and Ṣaṅkara concur in the reading of the term and its meaning, their approach seems to be independent.

### The term Samāpatti

Unlike the first term, the second term of the compound (Anantasamāpatti) has been uniformly presented by all the commentators as Samāpatti. The views of the commentators on "Samāpatti" are tabulated in Table 2.

Patañjali had defined Samāpatti<sup>[33]</sup> as "*the (clear/total) reflection of the knower, the instruments of knowledge or the object of knowledge (in the mind) from where the mental processes (vāttis) have dwindled and which is like a*

**Table 1: View of commentators on Ananta**

Commentator	Reading and view	Notes
Vyāsa	Ananta	Does not provide any meaning
Vācaspati	Ananta – the king of serpents	It is for the first time that this meaning is proposed
Bhoja	Ānanta – infiniteness of sky and such other things	-
Çaikara	Ānanta – infiniteness/vastness (attribute of the universe)	Çaikara states the meaning of Ananta as Viçva (universe) and the state of Ananta is Ānanta. In the critical edition <sup>[32]</sup> of Çaikara’s work: The Yogasūtra reads Ānanta, Vyāsa’s work mentions it as Ananta, Çaikara, the sub-commentator, takes the reading as Ānanta overlooking Vyāsa’s version
Vijñānabhikñu Rāmānanda Bhāvagaēeça Nārāyaēatértha Nāgojibhaōōa Sadāçivabrahmendra	Ananta – Çeña, the lord of serpents	These commentaries uniformly highlight the following attributes of Çeña a) He is/ his hoods are most firm (sthirata), b) He is the lord of serpents (Nāganāyaka) and c) He is the one who holds the earth (Pāthivé/Viçvambharā) on his thousand hoods (phaēāsahasra)

**Table 2: View of commentators on Samāpatti**

Commentator	View	Remarks
Vyāsa	Does not comment	-
VācaspatiMiçra	Does not comment	-
Bhoja	The mind focuses and becomes identified with the object (of focus) or the mind attains identification with the object without distractions	The terms Avadhāna (focus)/avyavadhāna (without being distracted) and Tādātmya (identification/transforming) are used to describe Samāpatti
Çaikara	The activity of the mind to pervade and assume the state (of the object of focus)	The term Vyāpya is used to describe the process of Samāpatti
Vijñānabhikñu	The mind fixes its focus (on the object) and attains identification (with it)	The terms Dhāraēā (fixing the mind) and Tādātmya are used to describe Samāpatti
Rāmānanda	Does not comment	-
Bhāvagaēeça	It is fixing the mind in the object of meditation	The term Dhāraēā is used to describe Samāpatti
Nārāyaēatértha	Same as Vijñānabhikñu	-
Nāgojibhaōōa	Same as Bhāvagaēeça	-
Sadāçivabrahmendra	It is meditating “I am the object of meditation”	The term Dhyāna is used to describe Samāpatti

clear/pure *crystal*.” The interpretation of the commentators on this Samāpatti can be classified into three based on the above tabulation.

### Samāpatti as Tādātmya

Most of the commentators have tried to follow the definition of Patañjali. They use the word Tādātmya (identification of the mind with the object of meditation) to explain Samāpatti. But it is interesting to note that various terms such as Vyāpya, Dhāraēā, and Avadhāna are used by commentators during the description of Samāpatti. These words come before the term Tādātmya in the respective commentaries.

### Samāpatti as Dhāraēā

Bhāvagaēeça, followed by Nāgojibhaōōa, restricts the meaning of the term to Dhāraēā.

### Samāpatti as Bhāvanā/Dhyāna

Though Vijñānabhikñu also uses the term Tādātmya and follows the meaning provided by Patañjali, he also provides hints to a different meaning to the term Samāpatti. While describing the mechanism of working of Anantasamāpatti, he indicates this to be a Bhāvanā (visualization)<sup>[34]</sup> (visualizing oneself as the firm Ananta). Though Sadāçivabrahmendra states it to be Dhyāna, his description indicates that he also intends it to be a Bhāvanā.

It is to be noted that Çaikara and Bhoja (who present the reading as ānanta) present the description of Samāpatti under classification “Samāpatti as Tādātmya”. Those that accept Ananta (Çeña) present Samāpatti under “Samāpatti as Tādātmya”, “Samāpatti as Bhāvanā/Dhyāna”, and “Samāpatti as Bhāvanā/Dhyāna”.

### The mechanism of working of Anantasamāpatti

Five commentaries have proposed a mechanism of working of this technique. Out of these, two models emerge: (1) Bhoja and Rāmānanda [Figure 1] and (2) Vijñānabhikñu, Nārāyaēatértha, and Sadāçivabrahmendra [Figure 2].

The views in the above classification can be illustrated as follows:

- Notes on Figure 1: Both Bhoja and Rāmānanda suggest a similar mechanism. But the object of Samāpatti is ananta for Rāmānanda whereas it is ānanta for Bhoja. Further, while Bhoja states that this practice will lead to cessation of pain due to the practice of āsana, it is Rāmānanda who clearly establishes the cause and effect relationship between lack of pain and attainment of success (firmness and comfort) in āsana

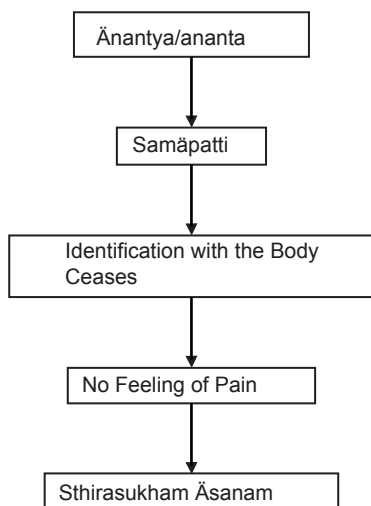


Figure 1: Model of mechanism of Bhoja and Rāmānanda

- Notes on Figure 2: It is interesting to note the mechanism proposed by Sadaçiva. He states that by Visualizing oneself as Ananta, unseen merit is accrued and by that success in āsana is achieved. Though it seems to be similar to the one proposed by Vijñānbhikū, there is a subtle variation. Vijñānbhikū makes visualization and “unseen merit” as two distinct factors for success in āsana, whereas Sadaçiva clubs both and states that by a mere visualization success in āsana is not achieved. Rather it is the “unseen merit” (adāñōa), which is accrued in the process that leads to success in āsana.

### Is Anantasamāpatti optional?

Vyāsa adds the term vā (meaning – or/and) while commencing his description on Anantasamāpatti. Vijñānbhikū attempts to explain as to why Vyāsa might have made this comment. In the view of Vijñānbhikū, Prayatna is Bahuvyāpara (a lot of (strenuous) activity). If one practices āsana after such prayatna then it leads to trembling of limbs. Hence, he states, one should desist (çaiṭhilya) from involving in strenuous activities just before the practice of āsanās. While explaining Anantasamāpatti, Vijñānbhikū states, even if one is unable to avoid strenuous exertion just before the practice of āsana, the practice of Anantasamāpatti will nullify the negative impact of strenuous exertion and lead to firm and comfortable posture. This clarifies the usage of the term ‘vā’. This also indicates the preference accorded to Anantasamāpatti over the other technique. Though Vācaspati Miçra also mentions the term “vā”, still, no other sub-commentator other than Vijñānbhikū has attempted an explanation as to why Vyāsa might have used the term “vā”.

### DISCUSSION

Observations and analysis were presented under four heads. The same pattern is followed for discussion also.

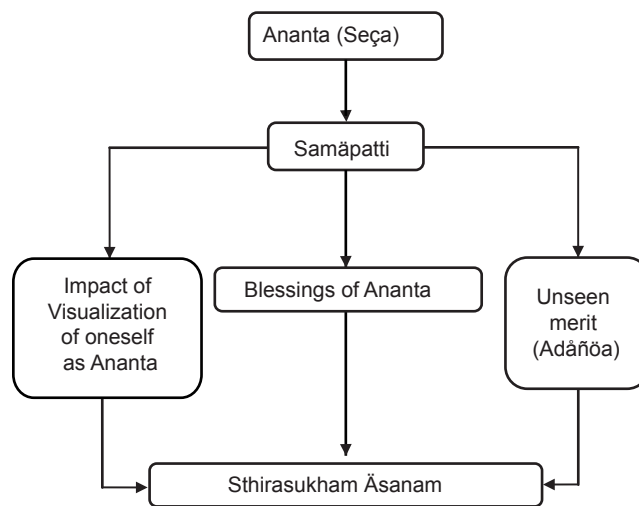


Figure 2: Model of mechanism of Vijñānbhikū, Nārāyaēatērtha and Sadaçivabrahmendra

### Ananta or Ānantya

It is evident that there are two readings. Among the two, Ananta seems to be the probable reading and Çeña seems to be probable meaning. Because -

- It is an ancient reading. Vyāsa’s commentary is considered the oldest and closest to the period of Patañjali. In all published editions of Vyāsa’s commentary, one finds the reading as Ananta. Even in the Vyāsa’s commentary that is printed along with the sub-commentary of Çaikara one finds the reading as Ananta. Thus, this probably seems to be a change made by Bhoja and later followed by Çaikara
- Further, excepting Bhoja and Çaikara, all other commentators follow the version provided by Vyāsa and uniformly interpret it as Çeña
- Though, among the commentators, the meaning Çeña is first proposed by Vācaspati Miçra (850 CE) still, Bhagavd-gētā (100-200 CE)<sup>[35]</sup> that predates the Yogasūtras (350-400 CE)<sup>[36]</sup> has used the term, Ananta to indicate Çeña. Thus, the possibility of using the term Ananta to mean Çeña in Yogasūtras is probable
- To counter the above supposition, references that predate Bhagavd-gētā may be cited. For example there are passages in the Upaniñads (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> BCE)<sup>[37]</sup> that prescribe meditation related to Ananta, the endless. Based on this it can be proposed that, ananta (and not necessarily ānantya) can be taken to mean endless and not Çeña. Such a view based on the Upaniñads may be claimed to serve another purpose - that of averting the compulsion of making an exception to accommodate a proper noun (Çeña). A survey of the Yogasūtras shows that no proper noun has been used by Patañjali.

To the above objection that may arise, it may be stated that, in all the Upaniñadic reference mentioned above - Manas or Prāēa or Nāma (name) is advised to be visualized as

Ananta (endless). The Upaniṣads, in the same context, state that such a practitioner attains endless worlds (ananta-loka). As evident, the adjective Ananta (endless) is common, both to the object of meditation (Manas or Prāṇa or Nāma) and the benefit (loka) derived from it. Whereas, in the present context of Anantasamāpatti of Yogasūtras, following the Upaniṣadic model, during the practice of āsana, if it is advised to meditate upon the endless sky or the world etc., it has to be stated as to how that endlessness will manifest in the result (transcending body consciousness to overcome the pain of āsana as suggested by Bhoja, does not explain this). Moreover, endlessness is not the desired outcome intended by Patañjali. Rather, firmness and comfort of the posture are expected. Thus, the Upaniṣadic connotation of ananta does not possibly suit the context of Anantasamāpatti. Further, making an exception by accepting a proper noun (Ṣeṇa) indeed may stand as a conspicuous reminder about the intended outcome of Anantasamāpatti.

- Finally, when one studies the sūtras that immediately precede Anantasamāpatti one finds sutras that discuss Ēḡvarapraēdhāna<sup>[38]</sup> (devotion to Ēḡvara) and iṇōadevatāsamprayoga<sup>[39]</sup> (communion with one's own chosen deity). In the same tenor, Anantasamāpatti in the form of contemplating about Lord Ṣeṇa might have been suggested by Patañjali.

### Meaning of the term Samāpatti

There can be no doubt regarding the meaning of the term Samāpatti as Patañjali himself has defined it.<sup>[40]</sup> Still as presented earlier three interpretations emerge. The commentators could have simply chosen to remain silent on the definition of Samāpatti like Vyāsa and Vācaspati Miḡra, thereby indicating the implicit acceptance of the definition of Patañjali. But except these two, all others have attempted an interpretation.

Thus, the very attempt to present an interpretation, seems to be aimed at presenting Samāpatti as applicable/practicable in the initial stages of yogic practice (Samāpatti, as evident from the definition of Patañjali and also from the context of its initial presentation in the Yogasūtra, seems to be a higher practice which comes after attaining proficiency in some or any of the methods mentioned previously (Yogasūtra 1.12–39) by Patañjali).

Of the three such attempts presented earlier, the third interpretation seems serve the purpose. It does not adopt a roundabout approach to accommodate the principal meaning like the first one. Neither does it completely veer off the principal meaning like the second attempt.

Further, the following may be stated regarding the probability of the third interpretation-Yogasūtras present

Pratipakṇabhāvana<sup>[41]</sup> as an effective method to overcome contrary thoughts (Vitarka). Vyāsa states that this Pratipakṇabhāvana, which was mentioned in the context of sūtra 2.32, shall be applied to other practices also.<sup>[42]</sup> Vijānabhikṇu, while elucidating this point, states specifically that “*Pratipakṇabhāvana shall be extended to sūtras that describe āsana and prāēyāma also*”.<sup>[43]</sup> When analyzed in this context, Anantasamāpatti seems to be a Bhāvanā technique (according to the third interpretation of Samāpatti) that complements Pratipakṇabhāvana. By Pratipakṇabhāvana all contrary thoughts that may lead to instability in (sthira-sukha) āsana may be withstood. Bhāvanā related to Ananta (Anantasamāpatti) may boost the stability thus protected.

Further, the third view, if accepted as the practicable meaning of Samāpatti, also assists in the emergence of a tangible mechanism of working of this technique, which is discussed in the next portion of the paper.

### Mechanism of working

- The views suggested by Bhoja and Rāmānanda [Figure 1] seem logical. But, the idea that body consciousness is transcended to attain firm and comfortable posture may not gain the acceptance of modern day exponents. Iyengar states “*One should not remain in anaesthetized, sedated state while doing Yogāsana*.”<sup>[44]</sup> Further TKV Desikachar states “*By training we mask our pain. Our breath will get disturbed*”<sup>[45]</sup>
- Accruing unseen merit and blessing of Ananta [Figure 2] are based on faith
- “*The impact of visualization of oneself as Ananta*” [Figure 2] seems to be a tangible mechanism. Patañjali's words, in a couple of occasions, testify to the efficacy of *Bhāvana* in leading to desired results.
  - In the Sādhanapāda, immediately after the discussion on Pratipakṇabhāvana, Patañjali presents various siddhis (powers).<sup>[46]</sup> Vyāsa brings out the significance of the sequence when he states “*by Pratipakṇabhāvana contrary thoughts reach a state from where they never sprout and powers (siddhis) acquired by that, indicate success in the practice*”<sup>[47]</sup> Thus it becomes evident that *Bhāvanā* (on contrary thoughts) is considered an important step in the mechanism of working of any yogic technique
  - Further, Patañjali considers Bhāvanā as a tool for attaining clarity of mind also.<sup>[48]</sup>

### Is the practice optional?

Anantasamāpatti does not seem to be an optional technique. Because -

- Except Vyāsa, who made the usage vā and Vijānabhikṇu who attempted an explanation to it no other sub-commentator

or commentator has given any input regarding the optional nature of Anantasamāpatti. Most commentators (quoted earlier) state “tābhyamāsanam siddhyati” (Success in āsana is achieved by both these techniques)

- Adding to this, if it may be taken as optional then, this would result in a self-contradiction for Vyāsa in interpreting the dual suffix of the instrumental case. Patañjali employs the same dual suffix (dvivacana-pratyaya) ‘bhyām’ in 12<sup>th</sup> sūtra of the first Pāda, while presenting the twin methods abhyāsa and vairāgya. Vyāsa, while commenting upon it, clearly mentions that “...restriction of modification of the mind (cittavātti-nirodha) depends on both”<sup>[49]</sup> (and not any one of them). Thus, making it clear that both are essential
- Further, had Patañjali intended to make Anantasamāpatti optional he could have very well used the term vā. It is to be noted that in the first chapter, to indicate optional nature of the concept being stated, the term Vā has been used many times by Patañjali.<sup>[50]</sup>

Hence, the term vā used by Vyāsa, can be taken to mean the less conventional yet probable “and” (conjunctive sense)<sup>[51]</sup> and not “or” (disjunctive sense). The justification given by Vijñānabhikṣu can be considered to highlight the importance of the practice of Anantasamāpatti.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

From the discussion above it follows that – Ananta is the probable reading, and the meaning seems to be Ćeṇa. Samāpatti is visualization of oneself as firm and strong like Ćeṇa. The mechanism of working seems to be the effect of mental visualization on physical firmness. And this requires to be practiced along with Prayatnaçaitilya.

It was stated in the introduction that there is contemporary uncertainty regarding Anantasamāpatti. It seems to stem from traditional sources. But, the literary traces left behind by these traditional interpretations and the analysis based on them has helped to arrive at the probable reading and the intended meaning.

Readings and meanings presented at the end of this discussion are based on literary analysis only. A scientific study based on the conclusions proposed above and also the various options that were offered by the traditional commentaries may help to ascertain the impact of Anantasamāpatti in the practice of āsana.

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**How to cite this article:** Jayaraman M. Anantasamāpatti - A technique prescribed by Patañjali for the practice of āsana: An analysis of traditional literature. Int J Yoga - Philosop Psychol Parapsychol 2013;1:75-81.

**Source of Support:** Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared