

## **Asana – Hatha Yoga Exercise**

*Excerpt from Advanced Hatha Yoga (Inner Traditions) by Sri S. S. Goswami*

Haṭha Yoga teaches that the relatively new role of muscles—the static transformation of the dynamic muscles, which is the basis of the development of the contemplative aspect of human existence—becomes most effective when the dynamic functioning is not ignored but rightly utilized. Haṭha Yoga aims at having the maximum result in concentration through the motionlessness of the body without sacrificing the organic soundness of the body, which can only be maintained through muscle movement.

Yoga exercise thus developed in two directions—dynamic exercise based on motion and concentration exercise based on static bodily attitudes. Haṭha Yoga has demonstrated that these two types are not really antagonistic to each other, but twin functionings of the organized whole, one cooperating with the other to support the achievement of a higher order of mental life while maintaining a vigorous form of physical life. Yoga exercise is essentially based on the delicate static-dynamic balance of the body.

The dynamic form of posture exercise is really the first stage of Yoga exercise, which promotes health and development of the body. It also prepares the body, through the development of the degree of strength, endurance, and flexibility required for the perfection and control of a posture pattern, for the successful practice of static posture exercise. Static posture exercise is the advanced form of Yoga exercise designed for developing vital endurance to a high level, and making the body most suitable for concentration.

### **The role of Muscular Exercise**

Muscular exercise plays a most important role in controlling and bringing the activities of all the functional systems to a desired level by properly utilizing the muscular-organic relations existing from the birth of muscle and developed in succeeding stages. The most fruitful approach is made through the fundamental musculature by raising its action level to a certain height through measured movements of definite patterns in which the muscles and other functional systems are in perfect balance. This we may call the body's health-level actions. Vital endurance and natural disease-resisting power are fully developed in this state of the body.

## **Time for Exercise**

The afternoon or evening (before dinner) is the best time to practice dynamic posture exercise for developmental purposes. The next best time for developmental exercise is three or four hours after breakfast. If these times are not available, developmental exercise may be done in the early morning (before breakfast). The early morning is the most suitable time for breath-control exercise and static posture exercise. Constitutional exercise may be done in the morning before or after breakfast or in the evening.

If posture exercise is done in the evening, constitutional exercises may be done either before or after breakfast. If posture exercise is done in the morning, constitutional exercise may be done in the evening. When posture exercise is done both in the morning and evening (as, for example, static exercise in the morning and dynamic exercise in the evening), constitutional exercise may be done after breakfast or at any other suitable time. You should rest for an hour or at least thirty minutes, after exercise, before eating a meal.

The matter of one's occupation or livelihood must also be given due consideration. If the muscles are hardly used at all in a given occupation, all the muscles of the body should be adequately used in general posture exercise. If certain groups of muscles are especially used in a particular occupation, they should be moderately exercised by posture exercise and the unused muscles should be adequately exercised. If the occupation is light, heavier forms of exercise should be performed and vice versa.

## **Health Condition and Exercise**

The form and amount of exercise depend to a very great extent upon the health of the person doing the exercise. If one is in poor health, one should begin with a lighter form of exercise; a strong individual may begin with a heavier form. If a person is weak and yet doing heavy work, it is good to stop work and do light exercise until some improvement in health takes place. If it is not possible to stop work, it may be advisable to do only some light constitutional exercise. Generally, it is better for a person of poor health to start with some suitable form of constitutional exercise till his or her overall health condition improves.

One should not exercise when tired, for then there is a need for rest. One should not exercise when nervously depleted, for then all the organs have been overworked and rest is needed. Exercise should be avoided when there is inflammation and any acute disease.

During an acute disease the body tries to eliminate the excess of accumulated poisons by increasing the functional activities of all the eliminative organs to a maximum degree. The body needs all available energy for this purpose alone, and nothing can be spared for exercise or even digesting food. Also the nerve energy during this period is more or less depleted. Furthermore, during this period the body does not need to be stimulated by exercise, for the functional activities have been sufficiently accelerated.

Exercise is usually contraindicated at the beginning stage of tuberculosis, gastric and intestinal ulcers, polyneuritis, high blood pressure, severe heart disease, and dropsy. Exercise should not be done when one is injured. In the case of strain and sprain, especially at their acute stage, exercise should be stopped.

Muscular exercise is necessary not only for adults, but at all ages from birth to death. Of course, certain types of exercise are more suited and beneficial at one age than at another. The attainment of a certain size of muscles together with a certain amount of fat, giving the body a beautiful shape, contour, curves, and vigorous health, are indispensable factors of beauty. Ideally, feminine beauty lies in facial beauty combined with a symmetrically developed body. Exercise, nutritious diet, internal cleanliness, and other health-building measures are factors of health and efficiency as well as of beauty.

Also, a proper mental attitude is absolutely necessary, as negative mental states lower the vitality, interfere with the normal functions of the vital organs, lower the disease-resisting power, and decrease the nerve power.

### **The role of Muscular Exercise**

In Hatha Yoga the fundamental movements have taken the specific form of spinal, abdominal, and thoracic-diaphragmatic movements applied both statically and dynamically to effectively nurture the organic state of the body in which the health-level is most satisfactorily established. This type of exercise is not so much for muscular specialization, but for natural healthfulness and immunity. Specialization, if desired, can be carried so far as it is possible without breaking the harmony between it and the health-level.

Psycho-neural exercise includes all movements requiring great skill and control. They may be locomotor or non-locomotor, instrumental or non-instrumental. Psycho-neural exercise trains the higher brain centers. It develops mental concentration, attention, control, coordination, and alertness. It enables the individual to perform various complex movements gracefully. It economizes the expenditure of energy. It shortens the latent period. It trains the memory and develops presence of mind, capacity of quick action, and other mental attributes. For physical education purposes the psycho-neural exercise should be applied in relation to the fundamental musculature.

### **Posture Movements in Yoga**

Posture movements are a systematized form of non-locomotor type of movements, based essentially on the strength form of exercise in which elements of psycho-neural exercise are included. By developing and fully utilizing the postural and movement potentials of the fundamental musculature, which is intimately related to organic development, posture movements play their role in the attainment and maintenance of a high standard of health and efficiency, which is equally necessary for a vigorous form of physical life and a higher order of mental life.

The effectiveness of posture movements greatly depends on two main principles: adoption of appropriate posture and a range of movements based on a graded system. An appropriate position of the body should be assumed at every stage of movement, otherwise correct execution of movement is not possible. To make the movements really effective, they should be executed in a graduated manner. At the final stage, the movements are carried out to their fullest extent, causing full contraction or full stretching of the muscles involved. There are certain posture exercises in which the movements are carried out to a moderate degree, while in other postures they are carried out to the fullest extent. In this way one posture may be converted into another posture. By assuming appropriate postures, light contraction is converted into medium contraction and finally into full contraction. Body resistance also works on a graduated principle in different postures. No instrument is used in posture exercise. Only appropriate posture patterns and associated movements with varying degrees of contraction are the guiding factors.

As the fundamental musculature, on which posture exercise is essentially based, has ultimately taken three forms—spinal, abdominal, and thoracic-diaphragmatic—so posture exercise has been developed into spinal, abdominal, and thoracic-diaphragmatic (or *prāṇāyāmic*) postures. The latter are static postures suitable for the practice of breath control in which the controlled movements of thoracic-diaphragmatic muscles are involved. The limb muscles have been utilized to effect the spinal or abdominal posture movements most effectively. These are the fundamental posture exercises. Accessory posture exercises have also been developed for the limb muscles. These may be considered as supplementary to the fundamental posture exercise.

For the most satisfactory results posture exercise should be combined with: breath control, which is especially related to the development of the thoracic-diaphragmatic part of the fundamental musculature; contraction exercise for full contraction and control of muscles; and purificatory exercise for internal purification and control of the body.

### **Relaxation**

Conscious relaxation is a state in which the mind becomes free from desires, agitations, and thoughts, and the body still. It is not sleep, but a mental and physical inactive state brought about consciously. Relaxation should also be practiced in Prone-Lying Posture, Standing Posture, and all folded-leg postures. Brief relaxation should be practiced between exercises. Prolonged relaxation should be practiced in Corpse Posture after completion of an exercise. It is highly beneficial to practice relaxation after any prolonged physical or mental work, any time of the day, if so desired, and on retiring.

In concentration exercise, which supposes conscious relaxation, the body is made motionless, respiration controlled, and mind concentrated. In dynamic exercise muscles are energetically brought into play, regulated respiratory movements are executed, and the mind is concentrated on muscles and their movements. At the height of its development the dynamic form consisted of breath-control exercise (*prāṇāyāma*), control exercise (*śaṭ karman* and *mudrā*), contraction exercise (*cāraṇā*), and posture exercise (*āsana* and *mudrā*). These are the main divisions. There are also subdivisions.

Concentration demands that the whole body should be kept motionless. Deeper concentration is incompatible with the body in motion. This is the beginning of what in Yoga is called *āsana* (posture).

Posture, as defined by Patañjali, is an attitude in which the body can be kept motionless yet at the same time produces a feeling of ease. For the practice of concentration, the motionless attitude of the body is to be maintained. One of the chief characteristic features of posture is the folded leg. A most intense type of human activity is exhibited in running. Motion is intensified in speed, and speed is best expressed in running. Speed work is principally executed by the leg muscles. Therefore the legs are apparatuses of intense activity. The energy of the body in motion in the form of extreme speed manifests through the legs. All the vital organs of the body—respiratory, circulatory, glandular, and nervous—take part and cooperate with the muscular system. In a word, the whole body functions in a specific way to support the action executed by the legs. This is very important for physical life, as these activities are associated with the development of vital vigor and organic strength. But this state of the body is not suitable at the time when the mind is in a contemplative state.

For intense concentration we need restrain the trend of the body to such intense action. In Yoga, an attempt has been made to prevent as much as possible the escape of energy manifesting as intense activity. That fosters the ability of the will to cooperate fully in mental concentration, by voluntarily making the instruments of this intense action inoperative. This is most successfully effected by assuming a folded-leg posture. Therefore in Yoga a motionless attitude with folded legs is considered the most suitable posture for concentration, and experience shows that it is so.

Another important feature of posture is to maintain the trunk erect. The importance of erect posture during concentration was realized very early, and it became an essential part of posture. In this new human position the brain and the muscles could cooperate to support concentration. A highly developed mental life and cerebral development are intimately related to an erect posture, with which the functioning of the fundamental musculature is associated.

In addition to folding the legs, the arms—instruments for performing complex movements and exhibiting strength—are also made motionless. Their motionlessness and relaxation help further in concentration. This is accomplished by assuming *dhyāna mudrā*, in which the hands are placed one upon the other, palms upward, at the center of the body, or by assuming *jñāna mudrā*, in which the arms are stretched and the hands are placed on the knees with the tips of the index finger and the thumb touching each other.

As the folded-leg, erect trunk, motionless attitude is to be maintained for a long period for the practice of concentration, it should also be easy. The earliest pattern of the motionless folded-leg posture seems to be what is called Pleasant Posture (*sukhāsana*), in which the folded right leg is placed on the folded left one. The word *sukha*, which is found in Ṛigveda, means “easy.” That form of folded-leg posture that has been termed Pleasant Posture is the easiest of all postures. It developed into Auspicious Posture, in which the right foot is inserted into the space between the left thigh and shank and the left foot into the space between the right thigh and shank. The next stage of development is what is known as Accomplished Posture, in which the left heel is set against the perineum and the right heel against the pubic bone just above the genitals. The Even Posture (*samāsana*) is the result of the modification of the Auspicious and Accomplished Postures.

Then an important development occurred in the folded-leg posture with an introduction of crossed leg with foot-lock. The first stage was reached in Hero Posture, in which one foot is placed on the opposite groin. Finally it developed into the well-known Lotus Posture, in which the right foot is placed on the left groin and the left foot on the right groin. These are the principal concentration postures of Yoga. Discomfort and pain are usually associated with posture. They should be conquered by practice and then the posture will prove most suitable for concentration.

The development of the concentration postures took place in the early Vedic Age. The yogins in that period could not reach the higher stage of concentration without perfecting the concentration postures. Many of the names given to these postures are found in the Vedas. The Auspicious Posture (*svastikāsana*) is derived from *svasti*, which means “success or prosperity” (Ṛigveda); it was symbolized as a special cross mark called *svastika*, which denoted success in an endeavor in the Chalcolithic Age in India. From *sidh*, which means to be successful (Ṛigveda), came Accomplished Posture (*siddhāsana*), that is, a posture that leads to success in concentration. *Vīra*, from which came Hero Posture (*vīrāsana*) means “a hero” (Ṛigveda), who is able to go deep into concentration in a difficult posture.

The word *kamala*, found in the Atharvaveda and Taittirīya Samhītā, means the characteristic red color of the lotus flower. This color is the symbol of the creative energy operating within a person. Brahma, or the creative aspect of the Supreme Consciousness, is represented by the red color and is seated in *kamalāsana* (Lotus Posture). This is also mentioned

in the Bhagavad Gītā. This creative energy usually expresses as the world consciousness representing the picture of the oscillating mind. The arousing, conveying, and controlling of this great energy are required at the higher stage of concentration. The most suitable posture for this purpose is *kamalāsana*. In later periods *kamalāsana* was also called *padmāsana*, which means the same thing.

The folded-leg concentration postures were so popular in the Chalcolithic Age in India that they were portrayed in seals such as those discovered at Mohenjo-daro. The Lotus Posture was introduced into Egypt, and it formed a part of the Egyptian gymnastic dance during the Old Kingdom (about 3000 to 2475 BCE).

The concentration postures formed an essential part of the eightfold Yoga and also of the Mantra Yoga, Laya Yoga, Haṭha Yoga, and Rāja Yoga. Gradually other postures for concentration were developed. In Haṭha Yoga, in addition to the development of the folded-leg postures into more difficult postures, a system of posture exercise was evolved.