

# THE YOGA SŪTRAS OF PATAÑJALI

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- (8) *Krauñca-niṣadana*, the curlew pose. This *āsana* and the next two are to be performed by watching the seating postures of curlews and the other animals referred to.<sup>105</sup>
- (9) *Hasti-niṣadana*, the elephant pose.
- (10) *Uṣṭra-niṣadana*, the camel pose.
- (11) *Sama-saṁsthāna*, the level pose. Vācaspati Miśra says that the heels and the tips of the feet are pressed together with the knees bent somewhat. Vijñānabhikṣu says that one places the hands over the thighs and remains with body, head, and neck straight up.

Vācaspati Miśra states that the steadiness Patañjali refers to in this *sūtra* means that these postures must be held without motion. “No fidgeting!” says Vijñānabhikṣu. Comfortable means that the poses must not cause trouble to the *yogī*. Also, all of them require that the chest, neck, and head—in other words, the spine—be kept straight, says Hariharānanda. Śaṅkara notes that Vyāsa had written “etc.” after listing these poses, indicating that there can be variations prescribed by the *guru*. On this note, Śaṅkara states that *yoga* should be performed in a quiet and pure place, after performing obeisances to the supreme *Īśvara*, the sages, and one’s own *guru*.

One might include in this discussion the reference to *āsana* in the *Vedānta Sūtra* tradition (IV.1.7–10), where sitting firmly is a prerequisite for fixing the mind. Moving around requires effort and is distracting, says the great theistic Vedānta commentator Rāmānuja, and lying down provokes sleep; therefore, one should sit on some support without any bodily effort.

प्रयत्नशैथिल्यानन्तसमापत्तिभ्याम् ॥ ४७ ॥

## II.47 *prayatna-śaithilyānanta-samāpattibhyām*

*prayatna*, effort; *śaithilya*, relaxation; *ananta*, the infinite, the cosmic serpent Śeṣa who holds the worlds upon his

heads;  
*samāpattibhyām*, the power of thought transformation,  
engrossment, absorption of the mind  
**[Such posture should be attained] by the relaxation of  
effort and by absorption in the infinite.**

*Āsana* becomes perfect when all effort or strain, *prayatna*, ceases and the body no longer trembles, says Vyāsa, and when the *citta* is absorbed in the infinite, *ananta*. Hariharānanda elaborates that the practice of *āsana* involves a level of pain at first. After a time, this disappears by complete relaxation, *śaithilya*, into the pose, and by meditating on infinite space so that eventually the body feels nonexistent, like infinite space. The essential idea is that by the practice of *āsana*, the body should be so relaxed that the *yogī* ceases to be conscious of it at all, and the mind can thus be directed toward meditation without any bodily distraction or disturbance.

Since one of the names of Śeṣa, the thousand-headed cosmic serpent upon whom Viṣṇu reclines, and who holds the universe on his hoods, is *Ananta*, some commentators also consider the *ananta* from Patañjali's *sūtra* here to be a possible reference to him, since, as Rāmānanda Sarasvatī notes, he holds the worlds very firmly. In other words, *āsana* should be held as firmly and comfortably as Śeṣa holds the worlds on his hoods. As is well-known, Patañjali himself is considered to be an incarnation of Śeṣa. According to tradition, Śeṣa, desiring to teach *yoga* on earth, fell (*pat*) from the celestial realms into the palm (*añjali*) of a virtuous woman named Goṇikā. The eleventh-century commentary of Bhoja Rāja contains the following invocation to Patañjali in the form of Śeṣa, which is still recited at the beginning of *āsana* classes in the Iyengar tradition:

I bow with folded hands to Patañjali, best of sages, who removed the impurities of the mind through *yoga*; the impurities of speech, through grammar; and the impurities of the body, through medicine. To he whose upper body has a human form, who holds a conch and *cakra* (disc weapon),

who is white and has a thousand heads, to that Patañjali, I offer obeisances.<sup>106</sup>

ततो द्वन्द्वानभिघातः ॥ ४८ ॥

*II.48 tato dvandvānabhighātaḥ*

*tataḥ*, consequently, from this; *dvandva*, by the opposites;  
*anabhighātaḥ*, not afflicted

**From this, one is not afflicted by the dualities of the opposites.**

By mastering posture, says Vyāsa, one is not overcome, *anabhighāta*, by dualities, *dvandva*, such as hot and cold. This language of transcending such dualities is very common in the Vedānta tradition (for example, *Gītā* VI.7; XII.18). Hot and cold (and all shades in between) represent the spectrum of sensations of the body, so this *sūtra* indicates that once *āsana* is mastered, one loses all awareness of the sensations of the body. The mind can now be focused elsewhere in meditation without being distracted by the body. Hariharānanda notes that upon mastering *āsana*, a state of calmness is experienced in the body, which allows for a detachment from the body's sensations such as hunger and thirst. In other words, the purpose and perfection of *āsana* indicated by Patañjali are when one loses all awareness of the body and, consequently, its sensations. It is a preliminary ingredient in a far larger undertaking.

तस्मिन् सति श्वासप्रश्वासयोगतिविच्छेदः प्राणायामः ॥ ४९ ॥

*II.49 tasmin sati śvāsa-praśvāsayor gati-vicchedaḥ  
prāṇāyāmaḥ*

*tasmin*, that; *sati*, is attained; *śvāsa*, inhalation;  
*praśvāsayoḥ*, exhalation; *gati*, movement; *vicchedaḥ*,  
regulation;  
*prāṇāyāmaḥ*, breath control