

What is the right Yoga practice for an individual - Perspectives from ancient texts

[Ganesh Balachandran](#), Ph.D.

January 17, 2021

Contents

- 1) [My encounter with Yoga](#)
- 2) [The benefit of asanas in the broader context of yoga](#)
- 3) [The benefit of Advanced asanas vs moderate and mild asanas](#)
- 4) [Intensity of practice : effort vs relaxation](#)
- 5) [Conclusion: The right yoga for an individual](#)

1) My encounter with Yoga

There is so much information flooding the internet comparing various types of yoga asana practice - Vinyasa, Bikram, Ashtanga etc. etc. - that one might wonder what the need for another article on this topic is. In this article, though, I would like to take a step back and look at the yogic system from a wider perspective than just asanas and highlight some key perspectives mentioned in the ancient yogic texts and also elucidated by various yogic mystics and gurus, both contemporary and of yore. This knowledge, I believe, will give one a deeper understanding of the practice and make one's choices suitable for his/her individual needs.

Though earlier in life, I had practiced yoga asanas from time to time, I never have had a daily dedicated practice till I started Ashtanga Yoga two and a half years ago, at the ripe old age of 43, with the modest goal of getting enough flexibility to be able to sit cross-legged after a hip replacement surgery to end seven years of living with pain that was caused by years of long distance running. I practice the first and second series of Ashtanga Yoga these days. Even though I am not very flexible and can not strike a perfect pose, the mental and spiritual benefits I have obtained from the practice, especially through the use of the bandhas and the breath, are significant. I hope some of the perspectives from ancient wisdom help you as they have helped me.

2) The benefit of asanas in the broader context of yoga

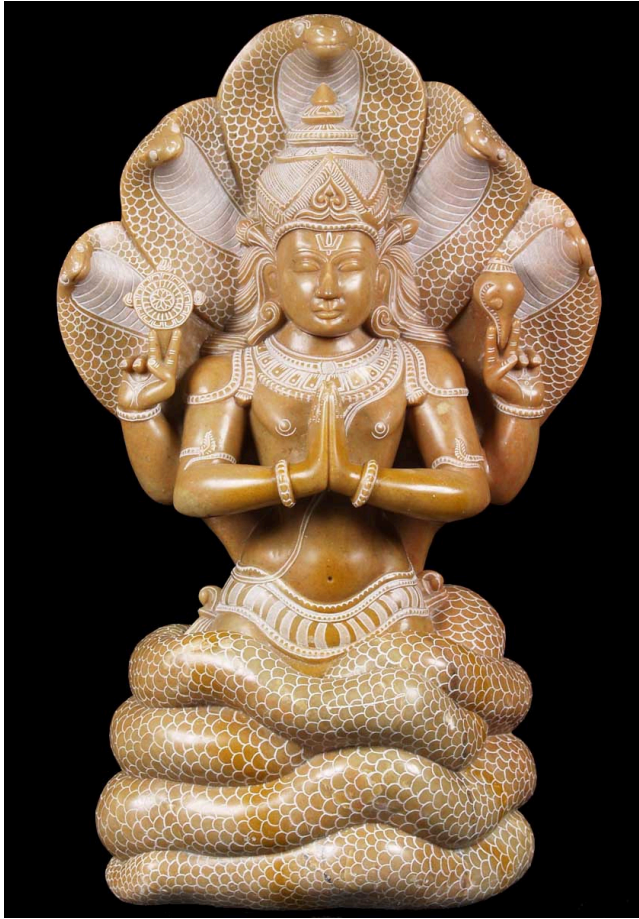


Fig. 1: Patanjali, portrayed in legends as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu's serpent, Adishesha

Patanjali, the great sage who lived sometime between the 2nd century BCE and 4th century CE, collected and organized the various yogic practices at that time into the famous Yoga Sutras (Aphorisms). He mentions asanas as one limb of the 8 limbs of the intermediate form of yoga practice called the Ashtanga Yoga¹. Of the 196 sutras, Patanjali allocates only 3 sutras for asanas. On the other hand, 6 sutras are allocated for pranayama. Over 60 sutras are dedicated to various aspects of meditation (dharana, dhyana and samadhi and a state called Samyama, that collectively includes all the three aforementioned forms of meditation). This pattern is very consistent in all ancient texts including the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Shiva Samhita and the Gheranda Samhita. In fact one of the few texts that talk about the asanas in any detail is called [Yoga Rahasya](#) (secrets of yoga) written by Sri Nathamuni in the 9th century CE.

¹ The other two forms being the Sadhana Yoga, the advanced and intense path described in chapter 1 of the Yoga sutras and the Kriya yoga, the milder path, described in chapter 2.

So, if asanas provide immense physical and mental well being benefits, as we well know today, why is it not emphasized or described in detail in the ancient texts ? What does the 3:6:60 proportion of sutras on asanas, pranayama and meditation, respectively, say about their relative importance ? To understand why this is so, one needs to understand the goal of yoga, which is described by Patanjali as the cessation of mental fluctuations and obtaining a clear and steady mind. If this were our ultimate aim, then after doing some asanas to settle the mind one would get more benefit by investing one's time in pranayama and meditation. This is after the fact that even asana practice, as emphasized by Shri T. Krishnamacharya, who is well known as the father of modern day asana practice, is a synchronization of the breath, the bandhas (locks) , the Drishti (gaze) with the movement and poses.

Further, the proportion of asana, pranayama and meditation vary depending on one's stage in life. Yoga Rahasya specifically says that in the middle stage of one's life (which could now be interpreted as the time between college and retirement), one's focus should be much more on pranayama than on asanas. Srivatsa Ramaswamy, who learnt yoga and the yogic texts from Shri T. Krishnamacharya for 30 years, in his book ["Yoga for the three stages of life"](#), mentions that, for people in the middle stage of life, instead of a 1.5 hour long asana practice, it is better to limit the asanas (practiced with proper breathing) to 45 minutes and use the rest of the time for pranayama and meditation to reap the most benefit. Patanjali in Yoga Suta 2.53 says that pranayama makes the mind fit for dharana (focus).



Fig. 2: Asanas, pranayama and meditation

3) The benefit of advanced asanas vs moderate and easy asanas

One of the questions that commonly arises is how much are the physical and mental benefits of advanced asanas vis-a-vis moderate and easy asanas. In a themed [interview](#) on the healing aspects of yoga, Petri Räisänen, a renowned Ashtanga yoga teacher says how Pattabhi Jois used to put it when someone asked him this question. Pattabhi Jois would say that the primary series heals the body and hence it is called Yoga Chikitsa (Yogic therapy) and the intermediate series is called the Nadi Shodhana because it purifies the nadis, the conduits for the flow of prana or life energy. He would jokingly, then say, that the third series has no special benefit other than for use in demonstrations.



Fig. 3: Pattabhi Jois teaching Digasana in the third series

This is not to underestimate the benefit of advanced asanas which build stamina and also helps one go deeper into themselves towards the goal of “the seer residing in one’s own true nature” as described by Patanjali in Sutra 1.3. However, the incremental benefit of pursuing advanced asanas towards reaching Patanjali’s end goal of yoga is marginal as opposed to doing pranayama and meditation. A friend of mine, who is a great yoga and yogic scriptures teacher, described an incident in his life during his youth when he spent two years mastering a one handed mayurasana (peacock pose). When he demonstrated the pose to his yoga teacher, his teacher nonchalantly clapped his hands in a slow deliberate fashion and told him that had he spent the time he invested in perfecting this pose into meditation instead, he would have become an advanced meditator, reaping a lot of the benefits of meditation.

4) Intensity of practice : effort vs relaxation

Another question that many students who are new to asana practice ask is- what is the right balance between effort and relaxation ? Patanjali in Sutra 2.47 says that by putting in effort and then letting go (relaxing) one attains infinite bliss. But what is the right amount of effort ? Too much effort can lead to injury and too little results in lack of progress. The answer to the question of the right amount of effort is highly individualistic and one has to rely on the following two guidelines:

- a) The first and unwritten rule of yoga is Ahimsa (non-violence) especially toward oneself
- b) During asanas, one's breathing should slow down resulting in deep and long inhalations and exhalations.

The second point was especially emphasized by T. Krishnamacharya when he taught students, according to Srivatsa Ramaswami in his [lectures on Yoga Rahasya](#).

In a book titled [“The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West”](#), by [Allistair Shearer](#), the author points out that the reasons for yoga as it is practiced today have very little in common with the reasons why it was practiced centuries ago. While there is nothing wrong in practicing yoga asanas to have a toned body, the results obtained with this aim only in mind are much less compared to those obtained with a higher goal of obtaining some level of mental calm. Further, when one is focussed on keeping the mind calm and the breath smooth, the correct amount of effort is automatically reached.



Fig. 4: Iain Grysak in Yoga Nidrasana (Yogic sleep pose) striking the perfect balance between effort and relaxation

5) Conclusion: The right yoga for an individual

In conclusion, one can determine the right type of yoga practice, by keeping the following guidelines in mind:

- a) The practice should result in calming one's mind and making the breath smooth and long
- b) The rule of Ahimsa should be kept in mind always
- c) The big picture end goal of yoga as the stilling of the mental disturbances is beneficial to keep in mind to determine the proportionate durations of asana, pranayama and meditation