

ASANA

CHAPTER I

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THE problem before us may be stated thus simply. A man wishes to control his mind, to be able to think one chosen thought for as long as he will without interruption

As previously remarked, the first difficulty arises from the body, which keeps on asserting its presence by causing its victim to itch, and in other ways to be distracted. He wants to stretch, scratch, sneeze. This nuisance is so persistent that the Hindus (in their scientific way) devised a special practice for quieting it.

The word Asana means *posture*; but, as with all words which have caused debate, its exact meaning has altered, and it is used in several distinct senses by various authors. The greatest authority on "Yoga"¹ is Patanjali. He says, "Asana is that which is firm and pleasant." This may be taken as meaning the result of success in the practice.

¹ Yoga is the general name for that form of meditation which aims at the uniting of subject and object, for *yog* is the root from which are derived the Latin word *jugum* and the English word *Yoke*.

Again, Sankhya says, "**Posture is that which is steady and easy.**" And again, "any posture which is steady and easy is an Asana; there is no other rule." Any posture will do.

In a sense this is true, because any posture becomes uncomfortable sooner or later. The steadiness and easiness mark a definite attainment, as will be explained later on. Hindu books, such as the "Shiva Sanhita," give countless postures; many, perhaps most of them, impossible for the average adult European. Others insist that the head, neck, and spine should be kept vertical and straight, for reasons connected with the subject of Prana, which will be dealt with in its proper place. The positions illustrated in Liber E (Equinox I and VII) form the best guide.¹

The extreme of Asana is practised by those Yogis who remain in one position without moving, except in the case of absolute neces-

¹ Here are four:

1. Sit in a chair; head up, back straight, knees together, hands on knees, eyes closed. ("The God.")
2. Kneel; buttocks resting on the heels, toes turned back, back and head straight, hands on thighs. ("The Dragon.")
3. Stand; hold left ankle with right hand (and alternately practise right ankle in left hand, etc.), free forefinger on lips. ("The Ibis.")
4. Sit; left heel pressing up anus, right foot poised on its toes, the heel covering the phallus; arms stretched out over the knees: head and back straight. ("The Thunderbolt.")



A GOOD POSITION FOR
MEDITATION.

sity, during their whole lives. One should not criticise such persons without a thorough knowledge of the subject. Such knowledge has not yet been published.

However, one may safely assert that since the great men previously mentioned did not do this, it will not be necessary for their followers. Let us then choose a suitable position, and consider what happens. **There is a sort of happy medium between rigidity and limpness; the muscles are not to be strained; and yet they are not allowed to be altogether slack.** It is difficult to find a good descriptive word. *Braced* is perhaps the best. A sense of physical alertness is desirable. Think of the tiger about to spring, or of the oarsman waiting for the gun. **After a little there will be cramp and fatigue. The student must now set his teeth, and go through with it.** The minor sensations of itching, etc., will be found to pass away, if they are resolutely neglected, but the cramp and fatigue may be expected to increase until the end of the practice. **One may begin with half an hour or an hour.** The student must not mind if the process of quitting the Asana involves several minutes of the acutest agony.

It will require a good deal of determination to persist day after day, for in most cases it will be found that the discomfort and pain, instead of diminishing, tend to increase.

On the other hand, if the student pay no attention, fail to watch the body, an opposite phenomenon may occur. He shifts to ease himself without knowing that he has done so. To avoid this, **choose a position which naturally is rather cramped and awkward, and in which slight changes are not sufficient to bring ease.** Otherwise, for the first few days, the student may even imagine that he has conquered the position. In fact, in all these practices their apparent simplicity is such that the beginner is likely to wonder what all the fuss is about, perhaps to think that he is specially gifted. Similarly a man who has never touched a golf club will take his umbrella and carelessly hole a putt which would frighten the best putter alive.

In a few days, however, in all cases, the discomforts will begin. As you go on, they will begin earlier in the course of the hour's exercise. The disinclination to practise at all may become almost unconquerable. One must warn the student against imagining that some other position would be easier to master than the one he has selected. Once you begin to change about you are lost.

Perhaps the reward is not so far distant: **it will happen one day that the pain is suddenly forgotten, the fact of the presence of the body is forgotten,** and one will realize that during the whole of one's previous life the body was always on the borderland of con-

sciousness, and that consciousness a consciousness of pain; and at this moment one will further realize with an indescribable feeling of relief that not only is this position, which has been so painful, the very ideal of physical comfort, but that all other conceivable positions of the body are uncomfortable. This feeling represents success.

There will be no further difficulty in the practice. One will get into one's Asana with almost the same feeling as that with which a tired man gets into a hot bath; and while he is in that position, the body may be trusted to send him no message that might disturb his mind.

Other results of this practice are described by Hindu authors, but they do not concern us at present. Our first obstacle has been removed, and we can continue with the others.

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