

The poses we adopt during our physical yoga practice are called 'asana' in Sanskrit, pronounced 'aars-ana' i.e. a long 'A' followed by two short 'A's. We can learn more if we look at the possible translations of the Sanskrit term:

- **Asana can be translated as 'posture' or 'attitude'**

This translation reminds us that our physicality reflects our energetic state and our emotional & mental attitudes so that by working with asana we are directly affecting our physiology, our energy as well as our psychology.

- **Asana can be translated as 'seat'**

This reminds us that within Classical Yoga, asana, as one of the eight limbs, refers to the seated position we must adopt for the inner practices of Raja Yoga where the ability to sit for prolonged periods is necessary. In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras in book two, verse 46 it says:

'Sthira Sukham Asanam' meaning 'asana is a steady, comfortable posture'.

Note that in Classical Yoga asana only refers to seated meditation poses with no direct connection to the vast number of poses used in Hatha Yoga; indeed many authorities tell us that originally the term asana referred to the surface upon which a yogi sat for meditation. The surface was ideally firm to the touch, neither too high or low and pleasant being traditionally made of grass, cloth, wood or of animal skin.

General background of asana

Hatha Yoga emerged from 6th century C.E. onwards and most of the Hatha Yoga texts are medieval. Hatha Yoga came from Tantric Yoga tradition where its practices are aimed at transforming consciousness through the vehicle of the body, working directly with the pranic energies of the body, by increasing the life force, and balancing and harmonising it, until an expansion of consciousness becomes possible through significant energetic changes.

In the Hatha Yoga Pradipika (C14th) it states there are 8,400,000 asana, as many as there are creatures. This tells us there are a multitude of asana, many taking the names of different animals, gods and goddesses, representing all of the different forms of consciousness.

Yet the HYP also mentions the most important asana are the four meditative poses indeed many of the Hatha Yoga texts such as the Siva Samhita only mention the meditative poses.

The following are descriptions of asana to be found in the Gheranda Samitha written around late C17th. The G.S. mentions the largest number of asanas, describing thirty-two:

Which contemporary asana do you think the following describe?

1) *The two feet to be placed on the ground and the heels to be placed contrawise under the buttocks; the body to be kept steady and the mouth raised, and sitting equably.*

2) *Let the toes touch the ground and the heels be raised in the air: place the anus on the heels.*

3) *Lie on the ground face downwards, turn up the legs and place them towards the back, catch the legs with hands, contract forcibly the mouth and the abdomen.*

4) Place the heels contrawise under the scrotum, stiffen (or keep at ease) the head , neck and body

So when we practice asana we are practicing postures which have been taught for centuries, and in the case of the seated poses for thousands of years, but remember sometimes they are sometimes taught differently and different texts award the same asana different names.

As we saw Sri Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) was one of the pivotal yogis of the modern age who innovated a new relationship to our practice of asana and this torch has been carried forward by numerous contemporary yoga schools in the East & West. There are literally hundreds of poses to be found in contemporary literature and you will find there are differences in names and in the different forms taken to be the 'traditional' form of an asana. This means if we are not following a particular tradition we can determine which form of an asana we take as the traditional form, and can choose to teach different variations of a particular pose as a modification or development, or indeed we can teach variations to renew interest and keep our body, mind and senses learning and growing.

As long as we have a rationale for what we are teaching, and can apply the principles of teaching asana, we can find our own style and be creative.

What differentiates the practice of asana from physical exercise?

The aim of yoga asana is very different from that of exercise per se because:

1. We seek to establish a different relationship with our physical bodies where we fully inhabit the body, gradually making the body more conscious as we become more aware of our inner landscape. We are gradually becoming more receptive to the natural intelligence of the body, becoming more conversant with our actual feelings, sensations, emotions and so forth. It is concerned with the integration of mind and body.
2. Simultaneously we are making the body a more comfortable home within which to live, helping the body's form and function to be maintained and improved, so overall we can function as harmoniously as possible; increasing the free flow of energy and the amount of energy available to us.
3. It is helping us to become more sattvic where there is a more equal measure of calmness and energy within the body and mind, enabling us to perceive more clearly; increased sattva helps us, both physically and mentally, to practice the more subtle yoga practices such as meditation.

And to return to the pages of the Hatha Yoga Pradipika it states in chapter 1, verse 17:

"Prior to everything, asana is spoken of as the first part of hatha yoga. Having done asana one gets steadiness (firmness) of body and mind; diseaselessness and lightness (flexibility) of the limbs."

It is within Hatha Yoga we start to see asana as being part of a sophisticated system whose aim is to provide a therapeutic function for the body and mind, where psychophysiological balance can be created. Then Hatha yoga is in essence a system whereby once balance is created ultimately Self-Realization can be achieved through the liberation of kundalini. For the Hatha Yogi Self-Realization is a physiological possibility.

What are the general characteristics of Asana practice?

Simply stated:

- There must always be breath awareness
- All movement is done with an inner sensitivity, in accordance with the body's needs
- The mind is focused and there is a moment to moment presence
- We take opportunities to explore our experience and self-reflect

[\[See the last page of the handout for an overview of the Pancha Koshas\]](#)

What are the benefits of asana in terms of the Pancha Kosha, the Five Sheaths?

Physically (Annamaya Kosha: The sheath made of food) asana:

Balances our musculature

- Bringing symmetry to the body
- Stretching tight muscles
- Strengthening weak muscles...

Tones and nourishes the systems of the body

- Maintains the integrity of the skeletal system
- Gives proper functioning of the spinal column, joints, ligaments and tendons
- Massages internal structures and organs...

Inhibits the aging process

- Counteracts the drying and contracting nature of aging
- Replenishing vital nutrients and removing waste materials....

Alleviates physical tension

- Releasing 'stuck' or 'congested' energy from the tissues of the body...

Balances the nervous system

- We are no longer over or under stimulated and can better withstand outer stress, being stronger and more adaptable physically..

Illuminates physical problems

- We may become aware of areas that are normally closed off to us...

Enables us to sit in a balanced manner

- As we become more in tune with the body, the body is able to sit with comfort and ease whilst remaining upright and open

Energetically (Pranamaya Kosha: the sheath made of prana) asana:

Helps us to better manage our energy

We work slowly with sensitivity and an asana practice always contains times of rest so we finish the practice feeling balanced and ready to move forwards into the day. Unlike other forms of exercise we do not feel exhausted but full of energy and ready for anything.

Increases energy levels and ensure that the distribution of energy is optimized.

Asanas open the body and allow energy to flow more smoothly. This is helped by the emphasis upon the breath and the mind, which are both engaged during our practice. The breath carries new energy or prana into the body and wherever we place the mind prana is increased.

Allows us to experience new energetic effects

Each asana is a different 'matrix' where the body is drawn into a new shape. Physically the structures of the body are used in a new way and we are experiencing new sensations meaning our energy pathways will be altered as we work to find a new sense of harmony.

Mentally & Emotionally (Manomaya Kosha: the sheath made of desire, the sensory mind) asana:

Develops positive mental and emotional qualities

Each posture inherently creates a specific feeling so for instance backbends (brahmana or energising) general create feelings of confidence and strength whilst forward bends (langhana or calming) create feelings of calmness and introspection etc. Ideally a practice contains all of the different types of asana leaving us with a feeling of harmonious balance.

Encourages us to experience being in the moment, alleviating mental tension

Mental tension is often associated with the mind being in the past and future where it has no real power and influence so by being absorbed in the asana practice we begin to be content to be absolutely present.

Helps us to focus our minds increasing our powers of concentration

By remaining very present and fully experiencing our practice of asana the mind develops its powers of concentration. By exercising our 'mental muscles' we may find that the mind becomes more one-pointed as we become absorbed within the practice.

Releases emotional and mental toxins lodged within the body

If a charged negative reaction is not fully experienced it becomes lodged within the structures of the body as it has not been digested and dissipated. This may for instance take the form of an accumulation of chemicals, strained nerves etc. blocking the movement of energy. Indeed Ayurveda and modern studies of epigenetics tell us that if an experience remains unacknowledged the cellular membranes simply will not allow information through them so that 'charged' substances sit within the extracellular spaces. Asana works upon the deeper structures of the body opening them, bringing awareness to our inner experience so that release can be experienced.

Cultivates feelings of well-being

The practice of asana brings us a sense of harmony and balance. We may feel better connected to ourselves, feeling more grounded and centered, and as a result better connected to the world around us.

Intellectually (Vijnanamaya Kosha: the sheath made of intuition or wisdom)

Cultivates a more positive relationship with our body

Yoga asks us to accept our own individual starting point each time we come to our practice and to work with our body in a compassionate and respectful manner.

Provides us with a mirror to better know ourselves

To grow we must know ourselves so unconscious feelings and thoughts cannot rise up unexpectedly and cloud our judgments and actions. If we are aware of how our mind and emotions are reacting to our asana practice then we can potentially learn a great deal about ourselves. How we approach asana practice reflects the way we approach life.

Alters our patterns of identification with the body & mind

Through the practice of asana as we become more observant and sensitive to the body and mind we learn to become the witness and over time we begin to identify more with the witness than the body and mind; thoughts become 'things' or events, i.e. less subjective.

Improves our ability to listen to our needs

When there is the regular disciplined practice of asana, as we become increasingly attuned to our mind and body, we are likely to make better choices so habits which do not serve us fall away and new more supportive habits are established.

Spiritually (Anandamaya Kosha: the sheath made of bliss, the causal body) asana:

Transforms our karma

In yoga we can say that our bodies and minds are a result of our past karma and are conditioned by our everyday thoughts and actions, our present karma. By working with asana we are releasing the products of karma and creating new ways of thinking and acting that will inhibit the creation of new detrimental karma.

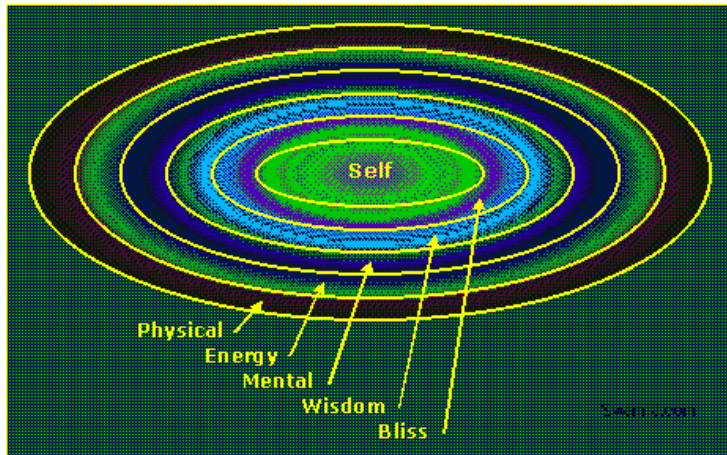
Create contentment or joy for no reason

With better energy flow, more self-awareness and the increased willingness to be with what is, even if it is our non-acceptance or anger, we can become less troubled by the rollercoaster of events we encounter, both inwardly and outwardly. The proverbial weeble who may wobble but doesn't fall down!

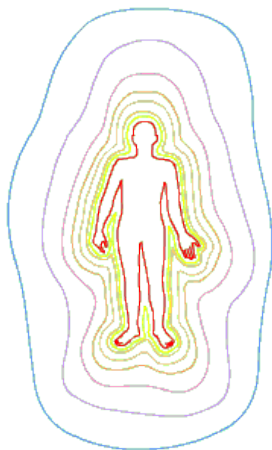
Transform our consciousness

The practice of asana provides an opportunity for transformation where traditionally the practice of asana as part of hatha yoga is part of the process leading us to raja yoga, where the transformation of consciousness is a physiological possibility as we refine the body and increase the strength and flow of prana.

The Pancha Kosha 'The five sheaths or bodies'



Although the sheaths are usually depicted as separate layers so they can be differentiated, they are in fact interpenetrating, existing as different levels of vibration, or frequencies of energy.



The word '**maya**' here can be seen as meaning 'made of' but its deeper meaning is 'appearance' highlighting how the koshas are both real in the sense that they allow us to function in this world but also unreal in the sense that ultimately we are not the koshas we are in truth the Self or Consciousness itself.

The pancha koshas are a way to conceptualize the different aspects of our being. They can be imagined as five veils surrounding the central flame of the eternal self. Ordinarily we identify with the outermost veils and rarely do we normally experience the innermost veils. Yoga practices help us to recognise the different sheaths and to experience the innermost sheaths, ultimately experiencing the Self, so that identity shifts from being primarily identified with the mind/body.

1) Annamaya Kosha

The sheath made of food
Our physical body.

2) Pranamaya Kosha

The sheath made of prana
This is the vital energy that animates the physical body.

3) Manomaya Kosha

The sheath made of the sense or desire mind
This is the automatic functioning of the mind where we process information received through the senses and usually act reflexively, where we incessantly chatter to ourselves!

4) Vijnanamaya Kosha

The sheath made of wisdom
This is the faculty of discrimination, self-determination, intuition and conscience. There is clarity and the ability to respond rather than simply react.

5) Anandamaya Kosha

The sheath made of bliss
This is the bright light of unconditional love closest to our inner self. In Tantra this is often described as the place of the ecstatic embrace of Shiva (spirit) and Shakti (matter). It is the space of contentment or a feeling of fullness.