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## Understanding Patanjala-Yoga-Sutra on 'Asana' From Sanskrit Commentaries

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# Understanding Patanjala-Yoga-Sutra on 'Asana' From Sanskrit Commentaries\*

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## Abstract :

A critical study of twenty-one easily available Sanskrit commentaries on Pātanjala-Yoga-Sutras by seventeen commentators from different walks of life has thrown light on the acceptable as well as controversial points and has indicated areas for further studies, viz.,

1. 'Āsana' as envisaged by Patanjali has a strong 'experiential base'.
2. The concept of 'āsana' Will have to be taken at the level of the *citta* to understand and follow its *experiential nature*.
3. As none of the Sutras dealing with 'āsana' have any *instructional verbs*, they cannot be treated at the level of *doing* or *to be done* only, but they require to be understood in the light of 'What is happening?' also.
4. The concept of 'ananta-samāpatti' as interpreted by the commentators does not give adequate practical and educational approach to its understanding.
5. Likewise, interpretation of the concept of 'dvandvā nabhighātaḥ' by the commentators also seems to be inadequate.

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**Introduction :**

Most of the recent literature on yoga is based on Hathayoga, and that too, with a lot of emphasis on Hathayogic āsanās. Generally, these āsanās are presented as a system of physical exercises meant for keeping fit and healthy. While highlighting the theoretical foundations of the subject, the authors (e. g., K. T. Behanan, 1938; James Hewitt, 1960; Swami Kuvalayananda and Dr. S. L. Vinekar, 1963; B. K. S. Iyengar, 1968; James McCartney, 1969; Pandit Usharbudh Arya, 1977) are seen to refer to Pātanjala-Yoga-Sūtras which is widely accepted as the source-book on Yoga.

A direct reading of the Pātanjala-Yoga-Sūtras-II/46, 47, 48 related to 'Asana' does not overtly or covertly convey any meaning emphasizing the exercise aspect of 'āsanās' relating it to health and fitness. On the other hand, 'āsaṇa' is described as a 'Yogāṅga' to be followed as an 'anuṣṭhāna' for the purification of the citta (PYS II/28).

Therefore, it was decided to scrutinize the Sanskrit commentaries on PYS to get the view-points of the commentators on the subject-matter and the findings are presented here.

**Material and Methods :**

Twenty-one easily available Sanskrit commentaries by seventeen authors related to PYS were scrutinised for this study. They are listed below in the alphabetical order of the authors.

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\* ( PYS=Patanjala yoga sūtras )

Serial No.	Author	Name of the Commentary
1. Anantadeva		"Candrikā"
2. Anant Pandita		"Pada-Candrikā"
3. Baladeva Misra		"Yoga-Pradīpikā-Vṛtti"
4. Bālarāmodāśīna		Tippanam on 'Tattvavaiśārādī'
5. Bhāvā-Gaṇeśa		"Pradīpikā"
6. Bhojarāja		Rājamārtanḍa"
7. Hariharānanda Āraṇya		a) "Bhāswatī"
- do -		b) "Yoga-Kārikā"
- do -		c) "Sarala-tīkā on 'Yoga-Kārikā'"
8. Nāgojī Bhatta		"Nāgojībhatta-Vṛtti"
9. Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha		a) "Yoga-Siddhānta-Chandrikā"
- do -		b) "Sutrārtha-Bodhinī"
10. Rāghavānanda Saraswati		"Pātanjala-Rahasyam"
11. Rāmānanda yati		"Maṇiprabhā"
12. Sadāśivendra Saraswati		"Yoga-Sudhākara"
13. Sankarāchārya		"Pātanjala-Yogasūtra-Bhāṣya-Vivaraṇam"
14. Vācaspati Misra		"Tattvavaiśārādī"
15. Vallabhāchārya		a) "Bhāṣya on Yogadarśana"
		b) "Bhojavṛtti-Kiraṇa"
16. Vijñānabhikṣu		"Yoga-Vārttikam"
17. Vyāsa		"Vyāsa-Bhāṣya"

\*(The Sr. Nos. appear in brackets as References hereafter.)

The salient points, expressions and statements by the commentators to explain the Sūtras II/46, 47 & 48 related to 'āsana' were studied in detail to understand their significances and were rendered into English with the help of dictionaries and other source materials, keeping in view 'the practical and experiential nature of yoga'. Certain points were discussed with yoga-practicants also.

The observations were analysed further to come to the conclusions.

**Observation and Comments :****I. General :-**

1. It is very difficult to determine conclusively the chronological order of these commentaries. It is commonly agreed that Vyāsa-bhāṣya (17) is the oldest available commentary followed by Vācaspati's 'Tattvavaiśāradi' (14). However, the recent discovery of a commentary claimed to be authored by Ādi (the First) Śankarācārya (13), if proved genuine, will be earlier than that of Vācaspati.

2. Most of the commentators do not seem to be Yogis, nor Yoga-practicants in the strict sense of the term. They seem to be either grammarians, or proponents of Nyāya, Sāṃkhya or Vedānta Darsanas, or Vaiṣṇavaitees, etc., as can be postulated from the manner in which they have treated the Yoga-sūtras in their commentaries, or from other works to their credit.

3. Vallabhācārya (15a) and Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha (9a) have extensively quoted various Hathā texts in their commentaries along with the various concepts of Hathayoga which refer to the health and fitness aspects of the 'āsanas'. However, they fail to give us the right type of insight into Patanjali's Sūtras on 'Āsana'.

**II. Observations in respect of individual Sūtras related to 'Āsana' :-**

PYS-II/46 : "STHIRA-SUKHAM-ĀSANAM"

'स्थिरसुखमासनम्'

**Observations :**

- A. According to some commentators, this Sūtra indicates the characteristics or attributes (i. e., 'Lakṣaṇa') of 'āsana' (3, 9b, 10, 11, 14 & 15).



B. The expressions used by different commentators to convey their understanding of this Sūtra are as follows ;

1. 'avayava-vyathā-anutpatti-lakṣaṇam' (12).  
'अवयव-व्यथा-अनुत्पत्ति-लक्षणम्'  
i. e., "A condition in which there is no disturbance from any part of the body".
2. 'deha-calana-rāhitya-lakṣaṇam' (12)  
'देह चलन-राहित्य-लक्षणम्'  
i. e., "The absence of body movements".
3. 'niścālam' (2,11) 'निश्चलम्' 'niṣkampaṁ' (1,6)  
'निष्कम्पम्' i. e. without movements"
4. 'sthiram' (1, 3, 6, 7a, 8, 9a 10, 13 & 14).  
'स्थिरम्' i. e., "Steady".
5. 'sthira-sukham' (15a, 17).  
'स्थिर-सुखम्' i. e., "Comfortable steadiness".
7. 'sukham-anudvejaniyaṁ' ( 6 )  
'सुखम्-अनुद्वेजनीयम्'  
i. e., "Comfort-undisturbed."
8. 'sukha-pradātve-sati-śarīra-vṛtti-sthiratvaṁ'  
(15a ).  
'सुख-प्रदत्वे-सति-शरीर-वृत्तिः-स्थिरत्वम्'  
i. e., "Comfortable feelings leading to steadiness in body behaviour".
9. 'sukhāvaham' ( 3, 7a, 7c, 9b, 11 & 14 )  
'सुखावहम्'  
i. e., "Feelings carrying comfort".

## Comments :

- (1) A good study of these expressions makes it clear that '*an experiential aspect*' is indicated by them rather than any particular kind or type of '*positioning or position of the physical body only*'.
- (2) Some commentators like Bālarāmodāṣiṇa, Vijñāna-bhikṣu, Sankarācārya, Vācaspati Misra and Vyāsa have even advocated the use of 'a belt' ('yoga-paṭṭakam'), or leaning against a pillar or wall ('stambha' or 'sopāśraya') to achieve this '*experiential dimension of āsana*'.
- (3) However, it is commonly seen that many of the modern writers try to explain the concept of 'āsana' as mere '*position or positioning of the body*', completely neglecting and overlooking the '*experiential aspect*' so clearly brought out in this Sūtra by various commentators.

PYS-II/47 : "PRAYATNA-ŚAITHILYA-ANANTA-SAMĀ-PATTIBHYĀM"

‘प्रयत्न-शैथिल्य-अनन्त-समापत्तिभ्याम्’

## Observations :

- A. Most of the commentators (1 to 16 except 4 & 15) refer to this Sūtra as '*the Means*' (i. e., '*Upāya*') to accomplish 'āsana'. Even though Vyāsa has not used this very term 'upāya' specifically in his 'Bhāṣya', the same meaning is implied in his commentary (17).
- B. This Sūtra has generally been divided into two components, viz.,-

(i) PRAYATNA-ŚAITHILYA” प्रयत्न-शैथिल्य’

and

(ii) “ANANTA-SAMĀPATTIḤ” ‘अनन्त-समापत्तिः’

C. In respect of “PRAYATNA-ŚAITHILYA”

प्रयत्न-शैथिल्य,

we come across the following expressions in different commentaries –

C1. ‘a--kleśena’ (1,6) ‘अक्लेशेन’

i. e., “Without any pain or distress”.

C2 ‘bahula-āyāsa-nivṛttiḥ’ (5, 8).

बहुल-आयास निवृत्तिः

i. e., “Without much of a strain”.

C3 ‘bahu-vyāpara-abhāvaḥ’ (3, 4, 15 & 16).

‘बहु-व्यापार-अभावः’

i. e., “Absence of excessive effort”

C4. ‘gamana-grhakarṭya-tīrthasnanādi-viṣayo yaḥ prayantno mānasa utsāhaḥ-tasya-śaithilyam’ (12).

‘गमन-गृहकृत्य-तीर्थस्नानादि विषयो यः प्रयत्नो मानस उत्साहः-तस्य शैथिल्यम्’

i. e., “Indifference towards the activities connected with tours, household duties, pilgrimage, etc.”

C5. ‘mrtavat-sthitireva’ (7a, 7b, 7c).

‘मृतवत्-स्थितिरेव’

i. e., “Staying totally unconcerned like a corpse”.

C6. ‘prayatna-upamāt’ (4, 9a, 9b, 11, 13, 15a, 15b & 17).

‘प्रयत्न-उपरमात्’

i. e., “Effort or exertion getting reduced or diminished”.



C7. 'svābhāvika-prayatna-śaithilyam' (14).

'स्वाभाविक-प्रयत्न-शैथिल्यम्'

i. e., "Natural relaxation of effort/exertion".

C8. 'yadā yadā-āsanam bandhnāmi-iti-ichhām karoti

prayatna-śaithilye-apī a-kleśenaiva tadā tadā

āsanam sampadyat e'(6). 'यदा यदा-आसनं बध्नामि-

इति इच्छां करोति प्रयत्न शैथिल्ये-अपि-अक्लेशेनैव तदा

तदा आसनं सम्पद्यते'.

i. e., "The 'āsana' gets accomplished whenever

the desire to perform it is without distress

and with relaxation of effort".

D1. With reference to the second component,

'ANANTA-SAMĀPATTI', we find another

reading given by Anantadeva (1) Ananta Pan-

dita (2), Bhoja Rāja (6) Hariharānanda

Āraṇya (7a) and Śankarācārya (13) as,-

"ĀNANTYA-SAMĀPATTIH".

आनन्त्य-समापत्तिः

D2. The following expressions are found in various commentaries related to this component of the Sūtra-

(a) 'ananta' being taken to represent the "Limitless Universe" :

i. 'anantaṁ viśva-bhāvam vyāpya sthitam cittaṁ' (13).

'अनन्तं विश्व-भावं व्याप्य स्थितं चित्तम्'

i. e., "Let the awareness of 'Limitless Universe' fill and stay in Citta".

- ii. *'ākāśādi-gata ānantye cetasaḥ samāpattiḥ'*  
(1,6).

‘आकाशादि-गत आनन्त्ये चेतसः समापत्तिः’

i. e., “Let the absolute awareness develop sky-like ‘Limitlessness’ ”.

- iii. *'ananta-ākāśam-asmi-iti bhāvanāḥ ... samāpattiḥ'* (7b, 7c).

‘अनन्त-आकाशम्-अस्मि-इति भावनात् ..... समापत्तिः’

i. e., “Develop or merge into such a feeling that ‘I-am-the-limitless-space!sky’ ”.

- (b) The mythological figure “Śeṣa Nāga” ( the king of serpents ) is taken to represent ‘ananta’:

- i. *'anante nāganāyake sthiratara-phanāsa-  
hasra-vidhṛta-visvaṁbharāmandale samā-  
pannam taddhāranyā tadātmatāpannam'*  
(3, 9b, 11, 14).

‘अनन्ते नागनायके स्थिरतर-फणासहस्र-विधृत-विश्व-  
म्भरामण्डले समापन्नं तद्-धारणया तदात्मतापन्नम्’

i. e., “Identifying oneself with the steadfast thousand-hooded Lord Ananta, the King of serpents, sustaining the Universe”.

- ii. Versions conveying similar sense have been given by other commentators who use the word ‘prthivi’ (Earth) instead of ‘viśva’ (Universe). ( 5, 8, 9a, 10, 12, 15a, 16 ).

(c) 'Ananta'--defined as 'Mahat' :

'Ānantye-parama-mahatve vā samāpannam'  
( 7a ).

'आनन्त्ये-परम-महत्वे वा समापन्नम्'

i. e., "Merging with the 'ĀNANTYE,  
that is, 'parama-mahatve' which may be  
the first evolute of Prakṛti."

(b) 'Ananta' is not defined, but indicates a  
particular condition of the Citta :

'anante-vā samāpannam cittam' (17).

अनन्ते वा 'समापन्नं चित्तम्'

i. e., "Citta becoming one with  
'Limitless' "

(e) Some commentators relate 'ananta-samā-  
patti' with the 'absence of awareness  
connected with the body' :

'deha-ahankāra-abhāvāt' ( 6 ) or

'देह-अहंकार-अभावात्'

'deha-abhimāna-abhāvena' (11)

'देह-अभिमान-अभावेन्'

i. e., "Absence of the 'I-am-the-  
body' consciousness."

(f) Bālarāmodāsīna ( 4 ) does not provide  
any explanation for these terms.

### Comments :

( 1 ) Most of the commentators as mentioned under  
D2 (b) ii., seem to prescribe '*Visualization of Lord Ananta  
steadily supporting the Earth*'. For many people, this pres-  
cription will mean an 'exercise in imagination' only,  
particularly for those who have been educated in modern



science. For, they know that the earth is neither static, nor it is supported by any snake as claimed by the Hindu Mythology. For them, this indicates a fictitious notion amounting to '*vikalpa*' in Patanjali's terminology.

( 2 ) Similarly, '*visualization of the 'Infinite' nature of the Universe*' may also be difficult for some persons.

( 3 ) The term '*Ananta*' has other meanings also, like, '*Viṣṇu*', '*Brahma*', etc.

( 4 ) Like that of the earlier Sūtra ( i. e., II/46 ), the contents of this Sūtra also indicate a strong '*experiential dimension*' referring to certain happenings inside the body and mind of the individual. This *experiential aspect based on the inner-happenings* have been brought out by the commentaries of Bhojarājā, Rāmānanda Yati and Vyāsa ( 6, 11, 17 ).

PYS-II/48 : "TATAH DVANDVA-ANABHIGHĀTAH"

‘ततः-द्वन्द्व-अनभिघातः’

#### Observations :

A. It is clearly mentioned by most of the commentators that this Sutra indicates the 'result' ('phala/siddhi' फल/सिद्धि) of '*āsana*' ( 1 to 16 except 4 and 13 ).

B. The following expressions are used to explain the concept of '*dvandas*' -

i) '*śītoṣṇādi*' ( 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9a, 9b, 10, 11, 13 & 17 ).

‘शीतोष्णादि’ i. e., “Cold and heat, etc.”

ii) 'śītoṣṇa-kṣut-trṣṇādi' (6. 7a, 7c).

'शीतोष्ण-क्षुत्-तृष्णादि'

i. e., "Cold and heat, hunger and thirst, etc."

iii) 'śītoṣṇa-sukhaduḥkha-mānāvamānādi' (12, 15b).

'शीतोष्ण-सुखदुःख-मानावमनादि'

i. e., "Cold and heat, pleasure and pain, respect and dis-respect, etc "

iv) 'śītoṣṇa-kāmakrodhādi' ( 15 ).

'शीतोष्ण-कामक्रोधादि'

i. e., "Cold and heat, lust and anger, etc."

v) Bālarāmodāsina (4) does not provide any explanation for the term 'dvandva'. 'द्वन्द्व'

C. The following expressions are found in respect of the concept of 'anabhighātaḥ' 'अनभिघातः'

i) 'anabhighātaḥ-cittālambanam' ( 5 ).

अनभिघातः-चित्तालम्बनम्

i. e., "The *citta* resting (on 'ananta') is not struck (by the 'dvandvas')."

ii) 'atādanam' ( 9b, 11 ).

'अताडनम्'

i. e., "Not beaten (by the *dvandvas*')."

iii) 'na-abhibhūyate' ( 3, 7a, 10, 13, 15, 16, 17 ).

'न-अभिभूयते'

i. e., "( The 'dvandvas' ) do not sprout up at all."

iv) 'na-abhihanyate' ( 1, 6, 12 ).

'न-अभिहन्यते'

i. e., "does not suffer (from the 'dandvas')".

v) 'apīḍanaṁ' ( 9a )

'अपीडनम्'

i. e., "( The *dvandvas* ) do not cause trouble"

vi) 'nāśayet' ( 7b, 7c ).

'नाशयेत्'

i. e., "( The *dvandvas* ) get annihilated".

viii) Bālarāmodāsīna (4) and Nāgojī Bhaṭṭa (8) do not provide any explanation to this term '*anabhighātaḥ*'.

D. According to Bhāvā-Gaṇeśa (5), the concept of '*dvandva-anabhighātaḥ*' gets directly related to *citta*.

Comments :

(1) The various terms used by the commentators to indicate the nature of the '*dvandvas*' are the phrases traditionally used in the Sanskrit Literature. But, for a student of yoga, their implications at the *practical and experiential level* look to be somewhat problematic, if not impossible.

(2) It is felt that no commentator has tried to explain the term '*dvandva*' in a convincing manner having a direct relation to '*āsana*'.

PYS-II/49 : "TASMIN SATI ŚVĀSA-PRAŚVĀSAYOH-GATI-VICHHEDAH PRĀṆĀYĀMAH"

'तस्मिन् सति श्वास-प्रश्वासयोः गति-विच्छेदः प्राणायामः'

Observations :

A. All the commentators relate '*tasmin-sati*' with '*āsana*'



- B. Vyāsa (7) correlates *tasmin-sati* ( तस्मिन् सति ) with '*āsana-jaya*' ( आसनजय ) which is again related to '*dvandva-anabhighātaḥ*' by using the expression-'*sati-āsanajaye*'.
- C) Anantadeva (1) mentions '*tasmin-sati*' as '*asana-sthairya*' ( आसनस्थैर्य ), thus connecting it with '*prayatna-śaithilya*' ( प्रयत्न शैथिल्य ) and '*ananta-samāpattiḥ*' ( अनन्त-समापत्ति : ).
- D. Some commentators ( 7b, 9b, 11, 12, 13, 17 ) are seen to describe '*prāṇāyāma*' ( प्राणायाम ) as an outcome ( '*pariṇāma*' / '*phāla*' / '*siddhi*' - परिणाम, फल, सिद्धि ) of '*āsana*' and describe this Sūtra as the indicator ( '*lakṣaṇa*' - लक्षण ) of '*prāṇāyāma*'.

Comments : Nil.

### Discussions and Conclusions

1. The contents of the commentaries on the three Sūtras- II/46, 47 & 48 related to '*āsana*' strongly indicate its '*experiential*' nature. However, an enquiring mind with the background and approach of modern scientific thinking looking for the practical guidance and aspiring for a personal experience, fails to get adequate information and understanding from them. This necessitates the need for re-interpretation of these Sūtras from a modern educational and psycho-physical view point. This might have already been attempted by commentators writing in languages other than Sanskrit ( Hiroshi Motoyama, 1981; P. V. Karambelkar, 1986; Rohit Mehta, 1975; Swami Digambarji, 1985 ).

2. Even though the Sūtras themselves do not contain any *instructional verbs*, no commentator has tried to highlight on this aspect. However, due to the very nature of the Sūtras themselves 'āsana' cannot be treated 'at the level of doing' or 'to be done' only but it requires to be understood in the light of 'What is' or 'What is happening' as a *phenomenon or a process* also. Practical help and guidance from living teachers and guides become a "must" for this.

Interestingly, commentators like Nārayaṇa Tīrtha (9a, 9b) and Vallabhācārya (15a, 15b) and others have extensively referred to techniques from Hatha-yoga, probably to indicate suitable practices to trigger-off these processes in due course of time. Moreover these commentators have discussed the health and fitness aspect of asanas as is done by Hatha texts and modern writers on Yoga.

3. It is felt that the concept of 'ananta-samāpatti' as interpreted by the commentators does not give an adequate practical and educative approach to its understanding under the changed socio-cultural environment.

4. Likewise, interpretation of 'dvandvā'nabhighātaḥ' also seems to be inadequate requiring re-interpretation.

5. From the present study it is felt that study of other commentaries by people from different walks of life and socio-cultural backgrounds (like Hiroshi Motoyama, and many others as quoted above) becomes a necessity to develop an adequate understanding of the practical nature of 'āsana as a Yogāṅga'.

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*( These have been listed according to the alphabetical order of the texts .*

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