

A Note on the *Āsana* in Yoga-śāstra

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I. Introduction: Development of yoga

It goes without saying that the system of thought inherent to yoga was one of the most important factors in the history of Indian philosophy. It is well known that yoga is fundamentally common to all schools of Indian thought, and has been practiced not only by Yoga-schools, but also by other schools of Indian traditional philosophies, Buddhism and so forth.

While this paper's aim is to philologically illuminate some aspects of āsana (yogic posture) in classical yoga, before discussing it in detail, it may not be useless to engage in a brief overview of the history of development of yoga.

The word "Yoga," originally derived from the root verb \sqrt{yuj} (to unite), is already used in the *Rg-veda*, in which it means putting [the horses or oxen] to yoke.¹ Although the origin of yoga has been discussed by many scholars for a long time, it is still not yet settled. According to Honda[1978](pp.3-5), however, the tendencies of their arguments can be classified into three categories as follows:

- (i) Before the Aryans invaded the Indian subcontinent, they had already developed the original form of yoga.
- (ii) The indigenous people who built the Indus valley civilization already had practiced yoga, and later, when the Aryans invaded the Indian subcontinent, they adopted it.
- (iii) Yoga practice developed through a mixture of Aryan and native culture.

The first proposition (i) was asserted by Oldenberg[1917](pp.401-407) and

¹ Honda[1977]p.6.

Garbe[1894](pp.33-34), in which they associated the origin of yoga with ancient asceticism (*tapas*). It seems that Hauer[1922] also took sides with them. However, he identified the origins of yoga in the hymn of Vrātya in the *Atharva-veda*, instead of the *Ṛg-veda*.²

In opposition, Eliade[1969] made the assertion (ii) that Yoga is pre-Aryan culture, based on the reliefs of Yogin, who is probably original form of Śiva, found in the ruins of Indus valley civilization excavated in 1920s.³

Ui[1932](p.138) and Kanakura[1949](p.135) insisted on the last argument (iii). The former considered both the stream of control of the mind (*manas*), originally derived from the *Ṛg-veda*, and the way of meditation, which had been generally practiced in Jainism and Buddhism, which not belong to the orthodox Brahmanism, as the origin of yoga. The latter, while recognizing Eliade's assertion, proposed that it is likely that there is a kind of common conception of yoga between Aryan and native.

Moreover, Honda[1977](p.5) declared that while yoga practice was the main current of native culture, in addition to that, as the result of adding the factor of Aryan tapas, traditional yoga occurred.

In the Upaniṣads, yoga dealt with the conception of controlling (*yukta*) the mind as well as the rest of the five sense organs.⁴ In the *Kaṭha-upaniṣad*, controlling the mind etc. is compared to taking control of horses with reins (*pragraha*).⁵ And in the *Śvetāśvatara-upaniṣad*, the older form of practice steps of yoga evidently appears.⁶

Coming to the *Maitry-upaniṣad*, we can see that yoga-practice became more systematic. For example, the six steps of yoga-practice seen in the *Maitry-upaniṣad*,⁷ evidently seem to be relational to the eight steps of yoga-practice

² Hauer[1922]pp.174-175.

³ Eliade[1969]pp.353-358.

⁴ KU 2.3.10-11.

⁵ KU 1.3.3-4.

⁶ ŚU 2.8-15.

⁷ MU 6.18ff.

(*aṣṭāṅga-yoga*) found in the *Yogasūtra*, ascribed to Patañjali.

In beginning of the *Yogasūtra*, yoga is defined as follows:

yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ //YS 1.2

“Yoga is the suppression of modification of the mind.”

It seems that this too famous phrase expresses the essence of yoga or final target of yoga-practice. The *Yogasūtra* designates some means of obtaining that condition, one of which is *aṣṭāṅga-yoga*.

In the *aṣṭāṅga-yoga*, the first five steps are regarded as the external limbs or parts (*bāhvir-āṅga*), and gradually practiced. The third stage is *āsana*. When *yogin* practices yoga, after the disciplining of abstention (*yama*) and observance (*niyama*), he must practice the *āsana*. Because *yamas* and *niyamas* are strictly not meditative factors, substantial practice of yoga starts with *āsana*.

However, in the history of yoga that we have seen above, yogic posture as technique of meditation does not appear until the later stages. The earliest description of posture is seen in the *Śvetāśvatara-upaniṣad* as follows:

*trirunnataṃ sthāpya samam śarīraṃ hr̥dī^indriyāni manasā
sammiveśya /*

brahma^uchupena pratāreta vidvān srotāṃsi sarvāni bhaya^āvahāni //
ŚU 2.8

“Raising three parts (chest, neck and head), and keeping it evenly, [he] should repress the sense organs in the heart with his mind. The wise man sails the stream which brings all the fear, in a raft of Brahman.”

Although, surely, this description contains the explanation of posture, its expression is too simple. In order to illuminate the contents of *āsana*, we have to refer to later texts.

This paper’s aim is to clarify some aspects of that *āsana*, through analyzing the description of the *Yogasūtra*, the *Yogabhāṣya* of Vyāsa (c.540-650)⁸, the oldest extant and the most authoritative commentary on the *Yogasūtra*, and three sub-commentaries, i.e. the *Tattvavaiśārādī* of Vācaspatimiśra (the

⁸ Honda[2007a]pp26-28.

⁹ Woods[1914/1966r]pp.xx-xxiii.

middle of 7th century)⁹, the *Yogavārttika* of Vijñānabhikṣu (c.1550-1600) and the *Yogasūtrabhāṣyavivarāṇa*, ascribed to Śaṅkara (c.700-750).

Traditionally, the explanation of the *Tattvavaiśārādī* had mainly been used to read the *Yogasūtra* and the *Yogabhāṣya*. However, after the *Vivarāṇa* were discovered and published in Madras¹⁰, this regular method changed. For, if the *Vivarāṇa* is Śaṅkara's authentic work, it is older than the *Tattvavaiśārādī*, and very important in the study of Indian philosophy. Therefore, using the *Vivarāṇa* as one of sources in the next section to clarify the transition of *āsana* serves a valid purpose.

II. Definition of *Āsana*

The definition of *āsana* in the *Yogasūtra* runs as follows:

sthira-sukham āsanam //YS 2.46

“Posture is stable and comfortable.”

As this description is too brief, we are not able to understand what the contents of *āsana* are. But according to the *Yogabhāṣya*, they are as follows:

*tad yathā padma-āsanam vīra-āsanam bhadra-āsanam svastikam
daṇḍa-āsanam sa-upāśrayam paryāṅkam krauñca-niśadanam hasti-
niśadanam uṣṭra-niśadanam samasaṁsthānam sthira-sukham yathā-
sukham ca[^]ity evam-ādīni* //YBh 2.46

“For example, the lotus-posture, the auspicious-posture, the swastika[-posture], the staff-posture, [the posture] with support, the bedstead[-posture], the seated Krauñca-bird[-posture], the seated elephant[-posture], the seated camel[-posture], even[-posture], stable-and-comfort, namely [posture] which can be practiced comfortably and others of the same kind.”

With this description, we can know only the name of *āsanas*. Therefore, as its concrete contents are still ambiguous, we must refer to some of the sub-

¹⁰ Polakam Sri Rama Sastri and S. R. Krishnamurthi Sastri, eds., *Pātañjala-Yogasūtra-Bhāṣya-Vivarāṇam of Śaṅkara-bhagavatpāda*, Government Oriental Series, no.94, Madras, 1952.

commentaries.

III. Contents of *Āsana*

As I mentioned above, I would like to refer to three sub-commentaries to illuminate the contents of *āsana*. In this section, descriptions of sub-commentaries are classified into each *āsana*, and analyzed one by one.

(1) padma-āsana (Lotus posture)

*tatra padma-āsanaṃ nāma---savyaṃ pādama upasamhṛtya
dakṣiṇa^upari nidahīta / tathā^eva dakṣiṇaṃ savyasya^upariṣṭāt /
kaṭy-uro-grīvaṃ ca viṣṭabhya, mṛ(ga)ta-suptavan nāsikā-agra-nihita-
drṣṭibhīḥ, samudgavad apihita-uṣṭhasamputaḥ, dantair danta-
agram aparāmṛśan, muṣṭi-mātra-antara-viprakṛṣṭa-cibuka-uras-
sthalah, rājad-danta-antara-nihita-rasana-agraḥ, hastau pārṣṇyor
upari kacchapakaṃ brahma-añjaliṃ vā kṛtvā, sakrd āsthāpita-ittham
samsthānaḥ, punaḥ punaḥ śarīra-avayava-śarīra-vinyāsa-viśeṣa-
parityakta-prayātnaḥ san yena^āsita, tat padma-āsanaṃ // (V)*

“Therein, that called the lotus-posture is [as follows]. Drawing the left foot, one should put it on the right [leg], and similarly, the right [foot] over the left [leg]. Then, arranging the hip, chest and neck, having the sight laid on the tip of a nostril like one dead or asleep, having the unclosed lips like a casket, having a separation of the jaws and chest without the tips of [the upper and lower] teeth touching, [at a measure of] just one fist, having the tip of tongue resting against the inside of front teeth, [put] the hands on the heels, in the shape of a tortoise or brought together in prayer (*brahmāñjali*), having the formation fixed into such [posture] once, when one who is existing as the person having the effort without a part of the body and special position of the body repeatedly sitting, this is lotus-posture.”

padma-āsanaṃ prasiddham / (TV)

“The lotus posture is well known.”

*aṅguṣṭhau sanvibandhenīyād hastābhyāṃ vyutkramaṇa tu /
īrvor upari viprendra! kṛtvā pāda-tale ubhe //*

padma-āsanam bhaved etat sarveṣām eva pūjitaṃ / (YV)

“O’ Brahman, putting the soles of feet on the thighs, one should hold the toes with the hands, but in reverse order¹¹. That is the lotus posture worshiped by all.”

It is noteworthy that the *Vivarāṇa* devotes a lengthy explanation to the lotus posture, while the *Tattvavaiśārādī* does not comment on it and the *Yogavārttika* also explains it just in brief. However, it seems that this fact suggests that the *padma-āsana* became so common that the *Tattvavaiśārādī* does not explain it in the later period.

As regards the position of hands, while the *Vivarāṇa* explains how to make the shape of a tortoise or brought together in prayer, the *Yogavārttika* describes how to hold the toes.

(2) *vīra-āsana* (Hero posture)

tathā kuñcita-anyatara-pādān āvaninvinyasta-apara-jānukam vīra-āsanam / ucyaṃāna eva viśeṣaḥ sarvatra // (V)

“Similarly, hero posture is that in which one foot is bended and the other [leg’s] knee is stretched out [on the ground]. The difference [from other postures] is just mentioned everywhere.”

sthitasya[^]ekatarāḥ pādo bhūny asta ekatarāś ca[^]ākuñcita-jānor upari nyasta ity etad vīra-āsanam / (TV)

“One foot of the sitting man is put on the ground, the other [foot] is placed on the bended knee, that is the hero-posture.”

eka-pādān atha ekasmin vinyasya[^]ūrau ca samsthitaḥ // itarasmīn tathā pādān vīra-āsanam udāhṛtam / (YV)

“Then putting one foot on [the opposite] thigh, similarly the other foot on [the opposite] thigh, is named hero posture.”

In these explanations, only the *Yogavārttika*’s description that two feet are put on the opposite thigh is different from the other two, in which one foot is put on the ground.

¹¹ i.e. right toe with left hand, left toe with right hand.

(3) bhadra-āsana (Auspicious posture)

tathā dakṣiṇam pādamaṁ savyasya[^]upari kṛtvā, hastam ca dakṣiṇam savyahas tasya[^]upari nidhāya, yena[^]āste, tad bhadra-āsanam / anyat samānam // (V)

“Similarly, when one sits down putting the right foot on the left [leg], the right hand on the left [hand], that is auspicious-posture. Other [manners] are common to [the lotus-posture]”

pāda-tale vṛṣaṇa-samīpe sampuṭi-kṛtya sasya[^]upari pāṇi-kacchapikāṁ kuryāt tad bhadra- āsanam / (TV)

“Making the space by bringing the soles of his feet close to his scrotum and placing his hands there in the shape of a tortoise, that is the auspicious posture.”

gūlphau ca vṛṣaṇasya[^]adhaḥ sīvanīyāḥ pārśvayoh kṣipeta / pārśva-pādau ca pāṇibhyāṁ dr̥ḍham badhvā suniścalaḥ // bhadra-āsanam bhaved etat sarva-vyādhi-viśāpaham / (YV)

“And, one should put the ankles below the scrotum, on the axis (*sīvanī*) of the sides. Then binding tightly the sides of the feet with the hands, [one should be] unchangeable. This is the auspicious posture, which is an antidote of all the diseases (*vyādhi*).”

According to the *Vivaraṇa*, this posture is the reverse formation of the lotus posture. But the other two works designate the posture sitting up straight with one’s legs folded underneath.

(4) svastika-āsana (Swastika posture)

dakṣiṇam pāda-aṅguṣṭham savyena[^]ūru-jaṅghena pariḡrhyā[^]adrśyam kṛtvā, tathā savyam pāda-aṅguṣṭham dakṣiṇena[^]ūru-jaṅghena[^]adrśyam pariḡrhyā, yathā ca pārśvibhyāṁ vṛṣaṇayor apīdanam tathā yena[^]āste, tat svastikam āsanam // (V)

“Wrapping the right big toe by the left thigh and calf, [one should] sit so that it is not seen. Similarly, wrapping the left big toe by the right thigh (*ūru*) and calf (*jaṅgha*), so it is not seen. And as if there is no pressure to

the scrota caused by heels, one who sits like that, is [said to be sitting in] swastika posture.”

savyam ākuñcitam caraṇam dakṣiṇa-jaṅgha-ūrv-antare dakṣiṇam ca^ākuñcitam vāma-jaṅgha-ūrv-antare nikṣīped etat svastikam / (TV)

“[He] should insert the bended left foot into the space between the right calf and thigh, and the bended right foot into the space between the left shin and thigh, that is swastika[-posture].”

jānu-ūrvor antare samyak kṛtvā pāda-tale ubhe //

rju-kāyah sukha-āsmaḥ svastikaṃ tat pracakṣate // iti / (YV)

“Making the soles of feet tidy [in the space] between knees and thighs, and sitting in ease with straight body, that is called the swastika [posture].”

These are clear and common descriptions. This posture is that in which the feet are inserted between opposite calf and ground.

(4) daṇḍa-āsana (Staff posture)

sama-gulphau sama-aṅguṣṭhau prasārayan sama-jānū pādau daṇḍavad yena^upaviśet, tad daṇḍa-āsanam // (V)

“Stretching so that the ankles and big toes are even, when one should sit letting his knees and feet even like a staff, that is staff posture.”

upaviśya śliṣṭa-aṅgulikom śliṣṭa-gulphau bhūmi śliṣṭa-jaṅgha-ūru-pādau prasārya daṇḍa-āsanam adhyaset / (TV)

“After the man sits, he puts his big toes (*aṅgulika*) together and puts his ankles (*gulpha*) together; places shins and thighs and feet on the ground, stretches them, he should practice the staff-posture.”

daṇḍa-āsanam=upaviśya śliṣṭa-aṅgulikau bhūmi-śliṣṭa-jaṅghor upādau prakārya daṇḍavac chayanam... (YV)

“The staff posture is that in which one stays like a staff, sitting down and stretching the legs touching the ground, with the soles touching each other, and the toes touching each other.”

It seems that descriptions of this posture are mostly common. It is to put legs together in sitting like a staff.

(5) sa-upāśraya-āsana (Posture with support)

*yoga-paṭṭa-saṁstambha-ādi-āśrayam*¹² *vā sa-upāśrayam* // (V)

“[The posture] with the support is that which relies on the yogic table or staff and so forth.”

yoga-paṭṭaka-yogāt sa-upāśrayam / (TV)

“Because of yoga using the yogic table (*yoga-paṭṭaka*), [there is the posture] of rest.”

sa-upāśrayam yoga-paṭṭa-yogena[^]upavesānam... (YV)

“[The posture] with support is sitting by yoga using yogic table.”

As Rukmani pointed out¹³, because I do not know what *yoga-paṭṭa* is, this posture is unclear. While there is a view that *yoga-paṭṭa* is yogic table¹⁴, there is a view that *yoga-paṭṭa* is a kind of cloth.

(6) paryāṅka-āsana (Bedstead posture)

ājānu-prasārīta-bāhu-śayanam paryāṅka-āsanam // (V)

“Bedstead posture is that which has the arms extended and hands resting on the knees.”

jānu-prasārīta-bāhah śayanam paryāṅkah / (TV)

“Bedstead[posture] is when a man lays down and stretches the arms on the knees.”

paryāṅkam ca jānu-prasārīta-bāhoḥ śayanam... (YV)

“And the bedstead [posture] is lying down with the elbows of the arms stretched.”

As regards this posture, all the texts have poor descriptions. But at least, that which is the laying posture can be understood from descriptions of two except the *Vivarāṇa*.

¹² Rukmani[2001](p.368) supplements some words as follows: (*na*) *yogapaṭṭasam(stham) stambha-ādi-āśrayam*. But I don't follow these revisions.

¹³ Rukmani[1983]p.219.

¹⁴ Woods[1917/1966r]p.191.

(7) *krauñca-niṣadana-āsana*, *hasti-niṣadana-āsana*, *uṣṭra-niṣadana-āsana*
(Krauñca-bird posture, Elephant posture and Camel posture)

*krauñca-niṣadanaṃ hasti-niṣadanaṃ uṣṭra-niṣadanaṃ ca
krauñca-ādi-niṣadana-saṁsthāna-sādrśyād eva draṣṭavyam* // (V)

“Krauñca-bird posture, elephant posture and camel posture should be seen based on the resemblance of sitting poses of Krauñca-bird and so on.”

*krauñca-niṣadana-ādīni krauñca-ādīnāṃ niṣaṅṅānāṃ
saṁsthāna-darśanāt pratyetavyāni* / (TV)

“Krauñca-bird posture and so forth should be understood by seeing the sitting postures of Krauñca-bird and so forth.”

*krauñca-niṣadana-ādīni krauñca-ādīnāṃ niṣaṅṅānāṃ
saṁsthāna-darśanāt pratyetavyāni...* (YV)

“Krauñca-bird posture and so forth should be understood by seeing the sitting postures of Krauñca-bird and so forth.”

While these postures are resemblances of sitting poses of animals, real practices cannot be read in this context. And it is noteworthy that the *Yogavārttika* indicates the same description as the *Tattvavaiśārādī*. It means that the former referred to the latter.

(8) *samasamsthāna-āsana* (Even posture)

*bhūmau nyasta^ūru-jaṅghaṃ samasaṁsthitaṃ*¹⁵ //

“The evened [posture] is that which has the thighs and calves touching on the ground.”

*pārṣṇy-agrapādābhyāṃ dvayor ākuñcitayor anyonya-saṁpīḍanaṃ
samasamsthānaṃ...* (TV)

“The two [feet] bended at the heels (*pārṣṇī*) and tiptoes (*agra-pāda*), are mutually pressed, [that is] even[-posture].”

*jānvor upari hastau kṛtvā kāya-śīro-grīvasya^avakra-bhāvena^avasthānaṃ
samavasthānaṃ*¹⁶... (YV)

¹⁵ The *Vivaraṇa* has the word “*samasamsthita*”, instead of “*samasamsthāna*” in the *Yogabhāṣya*.

“The even [posture] is that in which, after putting the hands on the knees, one stays in straightening up the body, head and neck.”

The *Vivaraṇa* and the *Yogavārttika* designate the variants. The propositions are different from each other, making it difficult to decide their real meaning. It may be that this posture is a kind of prostrating posture.

(9) *sthira-sukha-āsana* (Stable and easy posture)

*sthita-prasrabdhīḥ*¹⁷ / *anyena^api prakāreṇa svayam utprekṣya sthita-prasrabdhīḥ / anāyāso yena bhavati tad apy āsanam sthita-prasrabdhir nāma // yathā-sukham ca--yena rūpeṇa^āsīnasya sukham bhavati tad yathā-sukham / ādi-śabdād anyad api yathā^ācārya-upadiṣṭam āsanam draṣṭavyam //* (V)

“There is [the posture] having firm ease. Another kind [of posture] through which one looks up by oneself, is [the posture] having firm ease. When the difficulty appears by that [posture], this is also posture called having firm ease.¹⁸ There is [the posture] which can be practiced comfortably. When sitter’s ease appears by the form, that form is [the posture] which can be practiced comfortably. By using the word “etc.” (*ādi*), any other posture taught by the teacher should be understood.”

yena samsthānena^avasthitasya sthairyam sukham ca siddhyati tad-āsanam sthira-sukham / tad etad bhagavataḥ sūtra-kārasya sammatam, tasya vivaraṇam yathā-sukham ca^iti // (TV)

“That arrangement in which the continuer’s stability and ease are accomplished, is the posture that is stable and easy. The venerable author of the *sūtra* approves of this [posture]. That explanation is [the posture] which can be practiced comfortably.”

sthira-sukham ca sūtra-upāttam / tasya vyākhyānam yathā-sukham

¹⁶ The *Yogavārttika* has the word “*samavasthāna*” and “*avasthāna*”, instead of “*samasamsthāna*.”

¹⁷ Instead of “*sthira-sukha*” in the *Yogabhāṣya*, The *Vivaraṇa* has “*sthita-prasrabdhī*.”

¹⁸ As Kato[2007](p.911) emphasizes, it is noteworthy that the *Vivaraṇa* repeats “*sthita-prasrabdhī*” three times.

*iti / ādi-śabdena māyūra-ādy-āsanāni grāhyāni / yāvatyō jīva-jātayās
tāvanty eva^āsanāni^iti saṅkṣepaḥ // (YV)*

“And stable-and-easy is obtained from the sūtra. Its explanation is [the posture] which can be practiced comfortably. By the word “etc.,” the peacock posture and so forth should be understood. There are as many postures as there are creatures.”

These descriptions seem to be without concreteness. As pointed out in the footnote, the *Vivarāṇa* seems to intentionally designate the variant “*sthita-prasrabdhi*,” instead of “*shira-sukha*” three times. But the *Tattvavaiśārādī* and the *Yogavārttika* indicate that this posture’s definition is derived from sūtra main text, which defines the stable and easy postures. Nevertheless, it is common in 366 texts that when the continuer of the previous posture practices easily and comfortably, it is called the stable and easy posture.

And it is noteworthy that the *Vivarāṇa* and the *Yogavārttika* suggest the existence of other postures in the explanation of word “etc.” (*ādi*).

IV. Conclusion

As I have pointed out above, there are considerable differences between the three texts. This seems to indicate a facet of the transition of yoga philosophy.

While Nakamura[1996](p.302) remarks that the *Vivarāṇa* is more concise than the *Tattvavaiśārādī* as a whole, it seems that the *Vivarāṇa* is the most explanatory of the three works in describing the postures. For instance, the extensive explanation of the lotus posture in the *Vivarāṇa* is extremely detailed.

As regards this posture, Rukmani[2001](p.368) remarks that it is difficult to believe that Śāṅkara would have gone to such great lengths to describe these postures. But I suppose that although lotus posture is considered the basic posture, the reason that the *Vivarāṇa*’s description of this posture is so explanatory is that such a posture or manner of sitting was uncommon in the period of the *Vivarāṇa*.

In order to prove this supposition, it is also noteworthy that only the

¹⁹ Kanazawa[2003] deals with this topic.

Vivaraṇa refers to the manners and place for yoga practice¹⁹, before any explanation of postures. Though such description is already seen in the *Śvetāśvatara-upaniṣad*, the *Yogasūtra*, *Yogabhāṣya* and other two sub-commentaries do not contain it. It seems that Śaṅkara, who was well acquainted with Veda doctrines and knew this description as a matter of course, allowed for the fact that the details of yoga practice were uncommon and devoted great lengths to such explanations. Therefore, it seems likely that lengthy explanation was not considered necessary in the periods of the *Tattvavaiśārādī*, and of course the *Yogavārttika*. At the very least, this seems to indicate that the *Vivaraṇa* has an older style than the other two works.

As seen above, while there are many postures, these descriptions are almost the same in all three works. Therefore, it is difficult to clarify the developmental process of these postures from the descriptions of sub-commentaries. I would like to pursue this further, by referring to the *Yogasūtra* 2.47 and 48, which explain the prerequisites and effects of posture, probably containing the chronological descriptions. Unfortunately, space limitations prohibit me from doing so here, so I will reserve it for another article.

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