

ASANA NAMES AND HINDU GODS AND SAGES
By Richard Rosen

Traditional yoga manuals didn't name asanas after deities or sages. I did an informal survey of the asana names in four traditional books: Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Gheranda Samhita, Hatha Ratna Avali, and Shri Tattva Nidhi. Altogether these book lists 169 asana names. Slightly more than a third are animal names (37%), qualities and objects are next, tied at 18% each. This means that nearly three-quarters (123 or 73%) of the 169 asanas are named after animals, qualities and objects. Of the remaining 46 asanas, those named after human parts and natural objects together total about 13%, those with descriptive names total 7%. So of the 169 asana names there were just 2 teacher names (Matsyendra 3 times, Goraksha once) and 1 deity (Bhairava, one of the many nicknames for Shiva).

When did deity/sage names make their appearance? The earliest 20th century books I own were both published in 1928. The Secret of Happiness (by Yogacharya Sundaram) lists 24 asanas, none of them named after a deity/sage. Yoga Asanas Simplified (Shri Yogendra) lists 13 asanas, and again no deities/sages are named. Other books:

Title	Author	Pub date	Asanas	Deities
Popular Yoga Asanas	Swami Kunalayananda	1931	20	1
Hatha Yoga Simplified	Shri Yogendra	1931	5	0
Forever Young Forever Healthy	Indra Devi	1953	25	0
Yoga and Long Life	Yogi Gupta	1958	24	0
Yoga for Americans	Indra Devi	1959	31	0
Hatha Yoga	Shyam Sundar Goswami	1959	108	0

Then we come to the 1966 publication of BKS Iyengar's Light on Yoga. Of the 200 asanas listed, 23 (12%) are named after deities/sages as follows (poses loosely arranged in possible practice series).

EKA PADA SERIES

- SKANDA (Kartikeya) Son of Shiva/Parvati, the god of war
- BUDDHA Founder of Buddhism
- KAPILA Sage, founder of Samkhya
- BHAIRAVA Name of Shiva
- KALA BHAIRAVA Name of Shiva, both names are destructive aspects of Shiva
- DURVASA Sage
- RUCHIKA Sage
- VIRANCHA Name of Brahma

VASISHTHA SERIES

- VASISHTHA Vedic sage, intense rivalry with VISHVAMITRA
- KASHYAPA Sage, son of MARICHI
- VISHVAMITRA Sage, intense rivalry with VASISHTHA

BAKA SERIES

- GALAVA Sage, pupil of VISHVAMITRA
- KOUNDINYA Sage, family of VASISHTHA

TWISTS

- BHARADVAJA Vedic sage
- MARICHI Vedic sage, "mind born" of Brahma, father of KASHYAPA
- MATSYENDRA Hatha Yoga preceptor

MISCELLANEOUS

- ASHTAVAKRA Sage
- GHERANDA Legendary Hatha Yoga preceptor, central figure in the Gheranda Samhita
- GORAKSHA Hatha Yoga preceptor
- HANUMAN Demi-god
- NATARAJA Nickname for Shiva
- VALAKHILYA A class of 60,000 thumb-sized sages born from Brahma's body
- VAMADEVA Nickname for Shiva

The choice of names raises some interesting questions. Why name an asana after a war god (Skanda)? If we want to name an

asana after a war-like figure, why not take one or more figures from the most famous of all Hindu war stories, the Bhagavad Gita? Why no Krishnāsana or Arjunāsana? Or for that matter why no Sanjayāsana, named after the charioteer Sanjaya, who “envisioned” the entire Bhagavad Gita? What about Yudishthira, the central figure of the Gita’s frame story, the great Mahabharata epic? What about Rama, the hero of India’s other national epic, the Ramayana?

Is the Kapila named here the same Kapila who founded the Samkhya school, classical Yoga’s “sister” philosophy? If so, why no asana named after Patanjali asana (patanjalyasana), who most of the Indian teachers look to for their inspiration?

Asanas are named after two of the three gods of the Hindu “trinity,” Shiva and Brahma. But why are none named after the third god, Vishnu, especially since this god is the “heart” of the Bhagavad Gita? And why no asana named after Vishnu’s most famous avatar, Krishna? Why is an asana named after a legendary sage like Gheranda and not Svاتمarama, the human sage who authored the Hatha Yoga Pradipika? How about Svاتمaramāsana?

Why are several asanas named after relatively obscure (for Westerners) Vedic sages? Does anyone but the nerdiest yoga nerd know who the Valakhilyas are, and has anyone but these nerds read the valakhilya section in the Rig Veda?

And finally, where are the female-named asanas? I can find only one (maybe) in Iyengar, Parvatasana (maybe named after the goddess Parvati, though that’s not clear). How about Gonikāsana, named after the sage Gonika, Patanjali’s legendary mother? Or Shakti asana (shaktyasana), named after the supreme goddess, or Lakshmi asana (lakshmyasana), the goddess of good fortune, or Ushas, the Vedic goddess of dawn, the symbol of the rise of spiritual wisdom? Hey, let’s do what the yogis of the early 20th century did and make up a few simple poses, put them in sequence, and give them female names:

NAME HOW?

Ushasana Stand in Tadasana, arms to sides. With an inhale, turn the palms away from the “Dawn” torso and sweep them up perpendicular to the floor. Exhale, release them back to the sides, then repeat 3-4 times more.

Gonikasana Raise the arms with an inhale to Ushasana. Bring the

palms together and then lower the hands to the chest in Anjali Mudra. Lift the sternum and with an exhale bend forward to Uttanasana, keeping the hands in place. Take a few breaths, inhale the torso upright, exhale the hands to the sides and repeat 3-4 times more. Then stay in the forward bend position.

Lakshmyasana From Gonikasana Reach the arms (palms still pressed together) between the legs, extending the elbows fully. Squeeze the arms with the legs, pressing the arms out actively into the legs. Lift and extend the front torso as much as possible. Hold for 30 seconds to a minute, then draw the palms back to the chest, and with an inhale, lift the torso up.

Don't like this one? Heck, make up your own then.