

PATANJALI ON ASANA

The Sanskrit word *sutra* means “thread.” To the yogis, a *sutra* is an aphorism--a concise statement or rule--and any instructional manual consisting of such aphorisms woven together like threads. The *Yoga Sutra* is such a manual. Compiled by Patanjali sometime in the third century C.E., there are 195 aphorisms in this fundamental treatise of classical yoga, but of these, just three--with a grand total of 10 words--are dedicated to *asana*. Patanjali’s intent, of course, isn’t to describe *asana* in detail--that’s the job of the *guru*, the “weighty one” who serves as our spiritual guide. Rather, he gives us a kind of conspectus of the ideal *asana*, a standard by which we can judge the efficacy or “rightness” of whatever posture we’re performing.

Remember that to Patanjali, *asana* is a preparation for intensive breathing and meditation exercises, which demand that the yogi sit for hours on end without fidgeting or slumping. So the main criteria for *asana* is that it be “steady and comfortable.” This induces a “relaxation of tension” and the experience of the finite body as “coinciding” with *ananta*, the “endless” or “infinite.” The aim of *asana* here is to abolish or transcend, to “climb over,” what Mircea Eliade describes as the “modalities of human existence,” which sweep us along on the “rushing stream of states of consciousness,” and so contribute to the never-ending pain-full-ness of embody-ment. Patanjali calls these “modalities”--like joy and sorrow and pain and pleasure--the *dvandvas*, the “pairs of opposites.”

But not all yogis agree that in life, as Patanjali maintains, *sarvam dukkham*, “all is suffering.” Others affirm that life is an outpouring of divine bliss, the spontaneous self-expression and self-amusement of the Absolute, and the pairs--light and dark, expansion and contraction, revelation and concealment, unity and diversity--are not dualities in conflict with each other and with the soul, but the “dancing partners” of its creative tension.

Through *asana*, these yogis encourage us to join in the “dance”--and thus the world and its source--to arrive at the balance point not by separation, by moving away, but by integration, by making whole. Then our practice encompasses and celebrates all of our experience, and yoga becomes a way of life, not a way out of life.