

ANANDA MARGA

Asanas (yoga postures)

In the West we have come to equate the term "yoga" with yoga postures, but in fact they form only a small – albeit important – part of the whole system. The term "yoga" in fact implies a whole way of life which includes yoga postures as one of its many facets.

In Sanskrit, yoga postures are called asanas. Asana means "a posture giving physical comfort and mental composure." Asanas affect the glands, nerves, muscles and all the organs of the body. There are many physical benefits, but the most important effect is on the mind. The practice of asanas places pressure on the endocrine glands, and this results in the regulation of hormones secreted from those glands. The hormones affect the emotions, and the resultant emotional balance facilitates concentration and meditation. So asanas help prepare the mind for meditation.

Benefits of asanas:

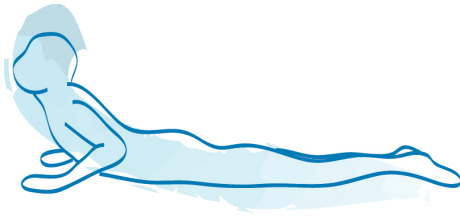
- Balance the hormone secretions from the glands.
- Give flexibility to the body.
- Improve respiration, as well as blood and lymph circulation.
- Massage the internal organs.
- Detoxify the joints.
- Relax the nerves and muscles.
- Cure diseases.

While practicing asanas the body should be cool and calm. The stomach should not be full. The room should be clean and warm, and there should be no smoke in the air. Except for the meditation postures, asanas should not be practiced during menstruation or pregnancy. In general, asanas should only be practiced on the advice of a proper teacher.

Spread a blanket or mat on the floor and try these simple and effective asanas:

Yogamudra: Sit cross-legged. Hold your left wrist with your right hand behind your back. Slowly lowering your chin, then your neck, bend down as far as you can go (as in the photo at the top of this page), breathing out as you go down. Stay there for 8 seconds with your breath held out, then rise up breathing in. Practice eight times.





Cobra: Lie on your stomach. Place your hands facing down on the floor beside your ears. Supporting your weight on your palms, push up and raise the chest, looking up towards the ceiling. Breathe in while rising, and hold your breath in that position for 8 seconds. Come down to the original position while breathing out. Practice eight times.

Long Salutation: Kneel down with your buttocks resting on your heels and your toes pointing forward. With your palms together, extend your arms up vertically next to your ears. Slowly bring your arms and head down as one, first bending your neck, then the whole upper body, until your fingers hit the floor, keeping your buttocks on your heels all the time. Now stretch out with your forehead and nose resting on the floor. Breathe out as you go down, and stay there with your breath held out for 8 seconds. Then rise up breathing in. Practice eight times.



After practicing asanas, you should do a skin massage and then lie down in deep relaxation for at least two minutes. The skin massage helps in the absorption of sebaceous oils which are naturally secreted onto the skin surface. Deep relaxation gives the body a chance to assimilate the positive energy gained from the asanas.

Skin Massage:

- Increases the lustre and suppleness of the skin.
- Relaxes and revitalizes the nerves.
- Increases the blood and lymph circulation.
- Harmonizes the vital energy (pranah) of the body.

The skin massage is not a deep muscle massage. It is a light going-over of the skin, as well as some extra attention given to the lymph glands. First rub your palms together a few times to warm them up. Start at the head and face and work down, rubbing the entire surface area of the skin. This is one of the reasons why it's best not to wear any clothes except your underwear during asanas – the skin massage should be done in direct contact with the skin. Pay particular attention to the throat, under the chin, the armpits, groin, and behind the knees. In these regions there are collections of lymph glands which also benefit from the massage.

Deep Relaxation:

- Induces the "relaxation response," similar to hibernation.
- Relieves stress.
- Lowers the blood pressure.
- Strengthens the heart.
- Relaxes the nerves and muscles.
- Decreases the need for sleep.

Using the same blanket as for asanas, lie on your back with your arms by your side, making sure that your breathing is calm and relaxed. Now go through your whole body, starting at your feet, consciously making sure that each part is completely relaxed – with no muscular tension at all. Go from the feet up the legs, consciously checking each part, into the groin area, into the abdomen (also feeling that your internal organs are relaxed), into the chest and shoulders, from the fingers and hands up the arms, then into the neck and up into the face, relaxing the facial muscles, including the eyes, and finally to the top of the head, feeling that your brain is also relaxed. Check once more that you are breathing calmly, and stay like that – fully relaxed – for a few more minutes.

Deep relaxation is especially important for those who do a lot of mental work. Do it as often as you like throughout the day. Whenever you feel mentally fatigued, even just a couple of minutes can be enough to rejuvenate and revive you.

www.anandamarga.org

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