



Asana Practice & Meditation by Connie Dyer

How does asana practice prepare us for the experience of meditation?

Preparing the body

When I first began yoga asana practice, I'd been meditating for 15 years. I learned then that moving the body and integrating breath and movement supported my meditation by helping me to relax and by releasing tensions held in the body that can make sitting still uncomfortable and distracting. As a young working mom, doing asana practice made a big difference in my meditation practice. If hips, knees, and back were stiff from too much sitting at work, my movement practice gradually made them more flexible; if it was tiring to sit up straight, the practice strengthened my spine and helped me find a balanced, effortless, pain-free meditation posture. Yoga brought awareness to every part of the body I had used but barely inhabited/understood.

In asana practice we were taught that postures and movement should be "steady and comfortable". This comes from Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, where "asana" is our bodily "seat" (one of eight components of yoga) and refers to seated postures for meditation. The commentary explains that this can be any position that secures ease for the individual, so we can start where we are. We don't have to master Lotus pose before we can meditate.

In the later tradition of *hatha yoga*, on which modern postural yoga is based, *asana* came to include any posture we are consciously established ("seated") in.

Preparing breath and awareness

The root meanings of *asana* include to sit, stay, or be, and so it refers to a state of being, something beyond our experience of the physical body. The famous yoga sutra "sthira sukham aasanam" makes this even clearer. It tells us that in our yoga practice (moving or still) we should feel both alert and deeply relaxed—in a balanced physiologic state.

The key to finding and flowing in this balance is our breath.

As we shift direction and activity in our day or during yoga practice, our breath shifts too. As we discover through practice, simply shifting our attention to the breath provokes a change. This happens because, for whatever we are doing, the body automatically seeks the most useful balance between the chemistry of relaxation inherent in the exhalation and the chemistry of alert wakefulness inherent in the

inhalation. Actively moving our body or just *moving the focus of our attention* provokes this balancing shift in our physiology to support our intentions. And our breath always reflects that balance.

A number of years ago, a yoga teacher asked Swami Chetanananda to talk about why we (as meditators) should do asana practice. He replied simply, “Because it gives us the opportunity us to observe ourselves changing.”

In asana practice, we typically spend an hour or more observing ourselves changing on every level-- especially if we are consciously moving with the breath. We discover that breath physically supports and informs our movement; we notice how excessive effort disrupts the flow of our breath and how relaxing and patiently balancing effort with ease smoothes out and strengthens the breath. And we start to feel how the flow of our breath is like a subtle flow of energy that moves through the entire body.

We also acquire heightened awareness of the states we flow through; we see how our thoughts and emotions and senses are all altered by what we do, where we put our attention, and how we breathe. As we practice focusing our attention on this moment-to-moment flow of experience, we learn that when we lose focus we can restore it simply by bringing our attention back to the breath.

The *Yoga Sutras* begins by explaining that the purpose of yoga is to reduce or quiet the fluctuations of the mind. (“yogash chitta vritti nirodhah”). Asana practice stills the body, and focuses our awareness on the energetic flow of our experience, so that in meditation our focus can shift toward observing the movement and experience of the mind. In meditation, as in asana practice, the key to comprehending and transforming our state is the breath.



Connie Dyer is a yoga instructor and a longtime student of Swami Chetanananda's.