

The Art of Sitting in Prāṇāyāma

How to Sit

1. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* (VI 10–15) Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna how a yogi should practise to purify himself:

- ‘10. In a secret place, in solitude, let the yogi be constantly in harmony with his soul, master of himself, free from hope and worldly possessions.
- ‘11. Let him find a spot which is clean and pure and sit on a seat that is firm, neither too high nor too low, covered with layers of cloth, deer-skin and with sacred (kuśa) grass.
- ‘12. Seated there, let him practise Yoga for self-purification, with a concentrated mind, and with his organs of perception and action under control.
- ‘13. With his body, neck and head erect, immovable and still, with his vision indrawn, his sight fixed as if at the tip of his nose.
- ‘14. With soul at peace and fearless, firm in the vow of Brahmacharya, let him rest, with a vigilant controlled mind absorbed in Me as the Supreme.
- ‘15. The yogi, whose mind is ever under his control, always striving to unite with the Self, attains the peace of Nirvāṇa – the Peace Supreme that rests in Me.’

2. Without giving anatomical details, the above quotation describes the traditional method of sitting for meditation (dhyāna). The Self (Ātmā) is no doubt beyond purity and impurity, but it gets caught by the desires and by the mind. Lord Kṛṣṇa says, ‘As fire is covered by smoke and a mirror by dust, as an embryo is enveloped by the womb, so is the Self (Ātmā) engulfed in desires generated by the senses and by the mind’. (*Bhagavad Gītā*, III 38.) So keep the body firm as a mountain peak, and the mind still and steady as an ocean, for meditation (dhyāna). The moment the body loses its own intelligence or firmness, the intelligence of the brain loses its power of clarity, both in action and receptivity. When the body and the brain are well balanced, pure intellectual illumination (sāttvic prajñā) is experienced.

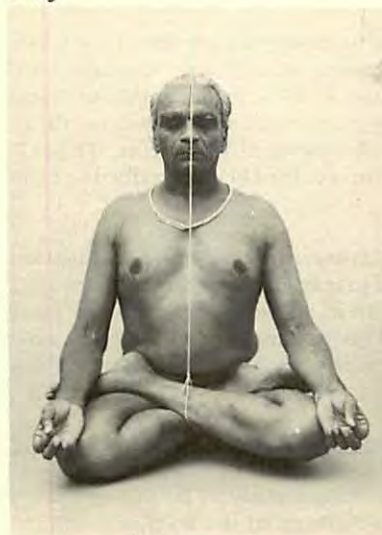
3. In meditation, the head and neck are held erect and perpendicular to the floor, whereas in prāṇāyāma chin-lock (jalandhara bandha) is performed. This prevents strain on the heart, keeps the brain passive and enables the mind to experience inner silence (see Ch. 13).

4. In the art of sitting for meditation (dhyāna) the aim is to sit straight, with the spine upright and the back ribs and muscles firm and alert. Therefore, position the body so that if a vertical line is drawn from the centre of the head to the floor, then the centre of the crown, the bridge of the nose, the chin, the hollow between the collar-bones, the breastbone, navel and pubic symphysis are in alignment (Pl. 15).

5. On the other hand, the eye-brows, ears, tops of the shoulders, collar-bones, nipples, floating ribs and pelvic bones at the hip joints should be kept parallel to each other (Pl. 16). Finally keep the mid-point between tops of the shoulder-blades in perpendicular with the sacrum to avoid body tilt.

6. In prāṇāyāma the first essentials are to learn how to sit correctly with the head down, so that the body remains straight and steady, and how the maximum amount of air can be taken into the lungs to oxygenate the blood. Keep the height of the spinal column the same throughout the practice.

Pl. 15



Pl. 16



7. Be continuously alert and adjust the body to a correct alignment throughout the practice, whether it be inhalation (pūraka), exhalation (rechaka) or retention of the breath (kumbhaka).

8. Just as an interior decorator arranges a room to make it spacious, so does the sādḥaka create maximum space in his torso to enable his lungs to expand fully in prāṇāyāma. His capacity to do so increases with practice.

9. According to the *Bhagavad Gītā* the body is called the field (kṣetra) or abode of the Self (Ātmā) and the Self as the Knower of the Field (kṣetrajña), who watches what takes place when the body has been cultivated by Prāṇāyāma. Prāṇāyāma is the bridge between the body and the Self.

10. In order to cultivate the requisite field of activity in the torso, the first thing to bear in mind is how to sit. Unless the seat is firm, the spine will sink and give way, the diaphragm will not function properly and the chest will cave in, making it difficult to fill the lungs with life-giving air.

11. Here an attempt is made to describe in detail the technique of sitting for prāṇāyāma by dividing the body into four areas, namely: (a) the lower limbs, that is the buttocks and pelvis, hips, thighs, knees, shins, ankles and feet; (b) the torso; (c) the arms, hands, wrists and fingers; (d) the neck, throat and head. Be firm in the areas of buttocks and pelvis, which are the foundation for correct sitting.

12. When practising prāṇāyāma, one normally sits on the ground in a posture, such as siddhāsana, swastikāsana, bhadrasana, virāsana, bad-dhakoṇāsana or padmāsana (Pls 3 to 14). In all of them see that the spine and the ribs resemble the broad middle portion of a banana leaf (see Pl. 2), the spine being the stem and the evenly-spaced ribs the veins. The tail-bone is like the end of the leaf. These postures have been described in *Light on Yoga*.

13. Although a number of postures are in use, in my experience padmāsana is the king of them all for the practice of prāṇāyāma or meditation (dhyāna). It is the key to success in both cases. In it, all the four areas of the body mentioned above are evenly balanced (as in Para. 11) and the brain rests correctly and evenly on the spinal column, giving psychosomatic equilibrium.

14. The spinal cord passes through the spinal column. In padmāsana, the adjustment and alignment of the spinal column and the ridges on either side move uniformly, rhythmically and simultaneously. The prāṇic energy flows evenly, with proper distribution throughout the body.

15. In *siddhāsana* the top part of the spine is more stretched than its other parts, while in *virāsana* it is the lumbar area that is more stretched. Some of these postures may be more comfortable, but for accuracy and efficacy *padmāsana* is the best of them all. In *padmāsana* the thighs are lower than the groin, the lower abdomen is kept stretched, with maximum space between the pubis and the diaphragm, enabling the lungs to expand fully. For those using *padmāsana*, particular attention should be paid to the three important joints of the lower body – the hips, knees and ankles – which have to move effortlessly.

PADMĀSANA

16. Sit on the base of the pelvis after doing *padmāsana*. Rest both buttocks evenly on the floor. If you sit more on one than the other, the spine will be uneven. Press the thighs down to the floor, bringing the thigh bones deeper into the hip sockets. Stretch the skin of the quadriceps towards the knees. This creates freedom round the knees to move diagonally and circularly from the top of the outer to the bottom of the inner knees. Bring the hamstring muscles closer in order to lessen the distance between the thighs. Then the anus and the genitals will not rest on the floor (Pl. 13). The line of gravity here is a very small area of the perineum between the anus and the genitals. The upward stretch of the spine begins from here and the body is simultaneously lifted upwards and sideways from the inner frame of the pelvis. Try and keep the top and bottom of the pubic areas perpendicular. If this is difficult, sit with the buttocks resting on a rolled blanket (Pls 17–18). In *padmāsana* both knees will not rest evenly on the floor (Pl. 13).



Pl. 17



Pl. 18

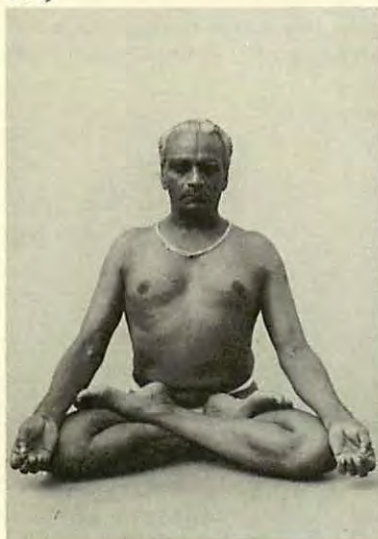
17. Do not turn the soles of the feet up to the ceiling, but keep them facing the side walls (Pl. incorrect 19 and correct 20). Stretch the metatarsals (the insteps), by turning the big toes towards the little ones, then the arches of the feet remain firm. If either arch drops, then the buttocks and the anus lose their grip, the trunk inclines and the spine sags in the middle, disturbing the whole balance of the torso. Do not spread out the knees or deliberately press them to touch the floor (Pl. 21 and 22). Any such attempt will only disturb the centre of gravity. Later, due to regular practice, though the knee remains above the ground one does not feel it. In order to get evenness in balance on the hips, it is advisable to rest the knee which is above the ground on a rolled towel (Pl. 23). Change the crossing of the legs on alternate days to get evenness in balance (Pl. 24).

The Torso

18. The torso or the trunk plays the most important part in the practice of prāṇāyāma. Keep the torso vigorously active, legs and arms dormant as if asleep, and the area from the neck to the crown of the head in a pure state of alert calmness. The trunk acts like a bridge between the static legs and arms and the alert but calm mind.

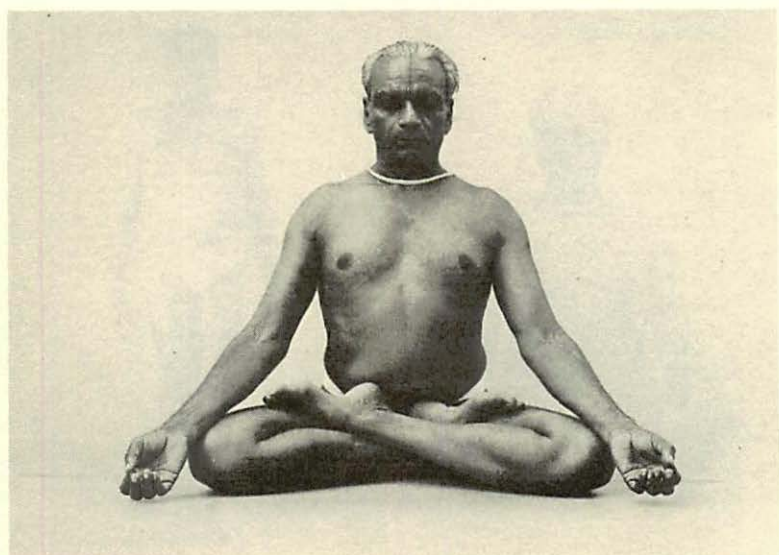
19. The torso will collapse if the spinal and intercostal muscles lose their grip, or if the vertebrae are not fully stretched. The muscles from the armpits to the hips, in front, in the back and on either side, are the keys. They

Pl.19



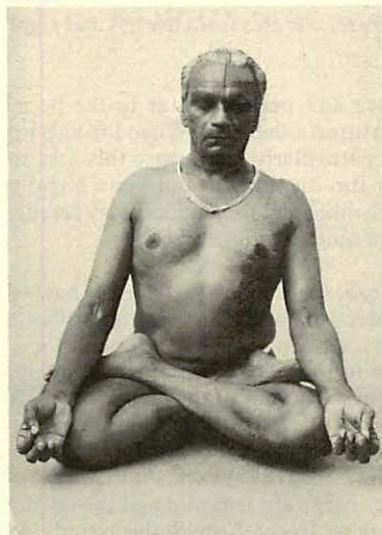
Pl.20



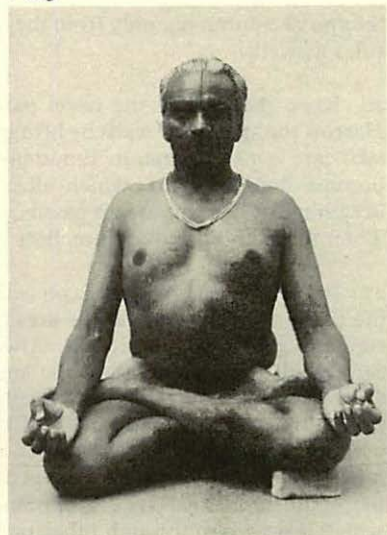


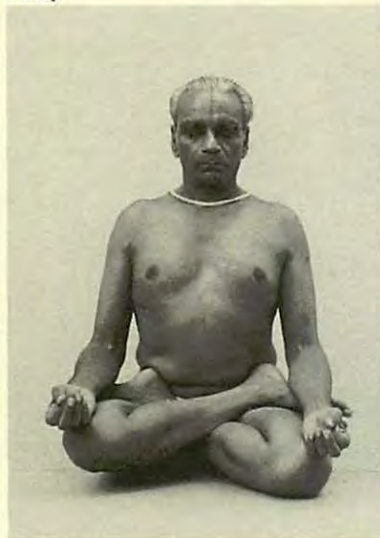
Pl.21

Pl.22



Pl.23





are anchored at the top to the collar-bones and shoulders, and at the bottom to the pelvis and the hip bone. Keep the back firm. Adjust the spine from the base to the top, that is, from the coccyx to the cervical vertebrae. Stretch the spinal column not only from the centre, but also from the left and right sides as well.

20. Keep the area of the navel passive and perpendicular to the floor. Narrow the area of the waist by lifting it up on either side. When lifting it up take care not to tighten it. Emotions, particularly fear, cause this area to become hard or tight, which affects the diaphragm and consequently breathing. When this area is passive the mind and the intellect stay serene. Then the body, mind and intellect are united with the Self.

21. In tādāsana (Pl. 25) (see *Light on Yoga*) space is created from the base of the pubis to the navel and the area there is kept flat. In sitting positions simulate the tādāsana stretch. Always stretch from the frontal spine. Stretch all the way up from the anus to the pubis, to the navel, to the diaphragm, to the sternum and finally to the hollow of the collar-bones. If the pubis collapses, the purity of the sitting posture vanishes and the practice loses precision. When the chest is stretched correctly the lungs function efficiently and more oxygen flows into the system. Any blockages in the subtle channels (nāḍīs) of prāṇic energy are removed and the energy which is drawn in through inhalation flows freely through the system. As

the disc of the sun emits rays of light uniformly in all directions, so the Self radiates the vital energy of the inhaled breath in all the corners of the lungs when the sternum is well lifted and stretched.

22. Remember that extension cultivates the field which brings freedom, freedom brings precision, which in turn creates purity and this leads to divine perfection.

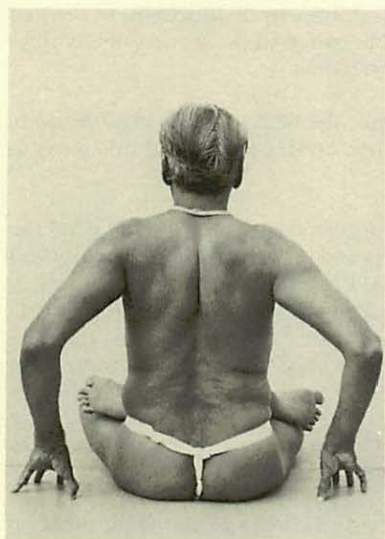
23. To find out whether you are sitting correctly or not, slightly bend the tips of the thumbs and separated fingers and press them lightly, gently and evenly on the floor beside the buttocks. Place the nails perpendicularly to the floor (Pls, side view 26, front view 27, back view 28). If the forefingers press down too hard, the head tilts forwards; if the little fingers, then the body tilts backwards. If the fingers of one hand press the floor more than the fingers of the other, the body tilts to the side where the pressure is more (Pl. 29). An even but steady pressure on the thumbs, middle and little fingers, and light pressure on the other fingers keeps the body upright. Do not jerk the shoulders or lift them up while pressing the fingers. Without lifting the knees, raise the buttocks slightly from the floor (Pl. 30), tighten the buttock muscles, tuck in the tail-bone and then place the buttocks on the floor. Those who cannot raise the buttocks with the tips of the fingers can do so by placing the palms on the floor as in Pl. 31.

Pl.26



Pl.27





Pl.28



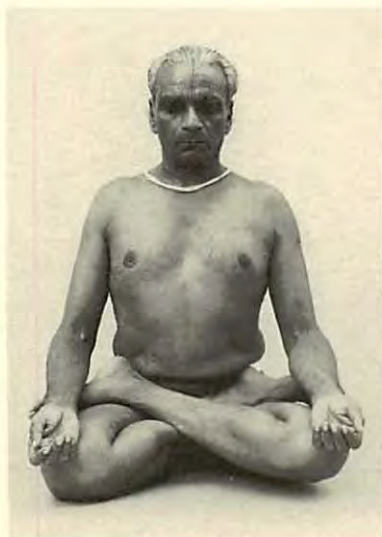
Pl.29

Pl.30



Pl.31





Pl.32



Pl.33

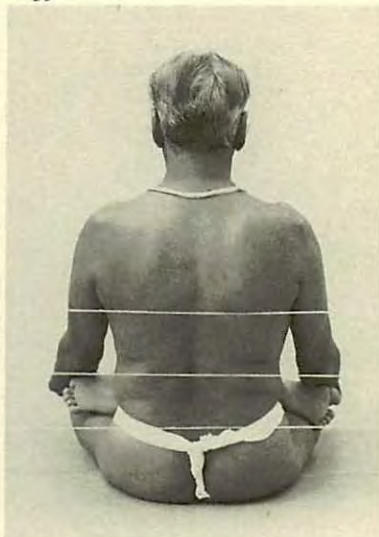
24. Lift the hands from the floor and rest the back of the wrists on the knees (Pl. 32) or left palm over the right on the lap and vice-versa (Pl. 33). This change of hands helps the back muscles to get a harmonious stretch. Do not straighten the arms at the elbows as this makes you lean forward (Pl. 34).

Three Crucial Spots

25. Remember the following three crucial spots in the body:

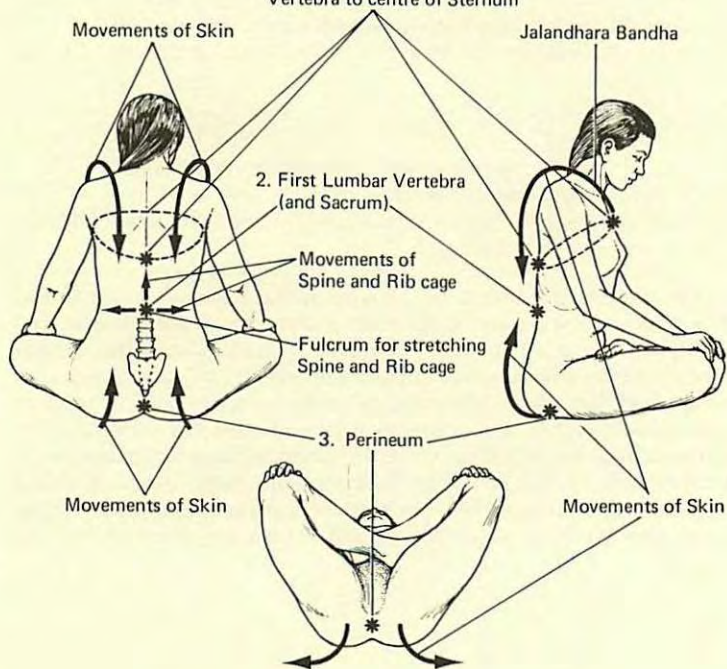
- (i) the perineum between the anus and the genitals;
- (ii) the sacrum and the first lumbar vertebra;
- (iii) ninth thoracic vertebra at the back, and the centre of the breastbone in front (Pl. 35 and Fig. 18).

When the posture is correct, the skin from the back of the neck and shoulders moves down towards the base and that from the buttocks and hips stretches upwards. The maximum tension is felt at the first lumbar vertebra where these two opposing movements meet. The thoracic vertebra at the back and the centre of the breastbone in the front are lifted towards the chin, while the chin is bent downwards as in *jalandhara bandha*. The upward stretch of the skin at the centre of the breastbone helps the chin to bend down so that it rests in the notch between the collar-bones. The first lumbar is used as a fulcrum for stretching the spine vertically and opening the chest sideways to maintain the strength of the four pillars of the body



Three Crucial Spots

1. Plane of Ninth Thoracic Vertebra to centre of Sternum



Pl.36



(corners of the torso) on either side. If the dorsal or the lumbar spine sags, the lungs do not expand properly. Only the correct movement and stretch of the skin at the back, the sides and the front of the torso enables the top lobes of the lungs to be filled.

Skin of the Torso

26. Like a bird spreading its wings in flight, keep the shoulder-blades down and open them away from the spine. Then the skin there moves down and the back of the armpits are slightly lower than the front ones. This prevents the back from drooping. The skin of the front is stretched sideways on each side as the breasts are lifted away from the armpits (Pl. 36).

27. The inner and the outer intercostal muscles inter-connect the whole rib cage and control diagonal cross-stretches. It is commonly understood that the action of the inner intercostal muscles is expiratory and the action of the outer intercostal muscles is inspiratory. Normal deep breathing techniques differ from that of prāṇāyāma techniques. In prāṇāyāma, the inner-intercostal muscles at the back initiate inspiration and the outer intercostal muscles at the front initiate expiration. In internal retention (see Ch. 15) the sādḥaka has to balance evenly and fully the muscles of the chest wall throughout to release tension in the brain. The muscles and skin at the back must act in unison, as if interwoven, both in prāṇāyāma as well as in meditation (dhyāna).



Pl.37



Pl.38

Pl.39



Pl.40



28. The tautness or the slackness of the skin of the trunk indicates emotional stability or the lack of it, and shows whether a person has achieved serenity and tranquillity of mind. If the skin at the top of the chest near the collar-bones caves in and sags, the person is a victim of his emotions. A firm chest is a sign of stability. If the chest and diaphragm are not kept steady and the activity of the skin is not co-ordinated with the movements of the back muscles, no serenity in breathing will be felt. If they are activated in co-ordination, courage comes to inspire the mind.

29. In the art of sitting, the back moves forward to meet the chest. Watch your clothing, for if your back touches the cloth, the movement is wrong, whereas if the front touches it is correct (faulty, Pls 37 and 38; correct, Pls 39 and 40).

30. Beginners may sit near a wall, tucking the buttocks close to it. Keep the base of the sacrum and the top of the shoulder-blades touching the wall. When the shoulders touch the wall the base of the sacrum tends to move away from the wall (Pl. 41). If this occurs, readjust the position (Pl. 42). Stretch the shoulder-blades outwards. To get the correct position, place between them, just behind the breastbone, a cake of soap, a piece of wood of a similar size, or a small rolled towel (Pl. 43).

Pl.41



Pl.42





Pl.43

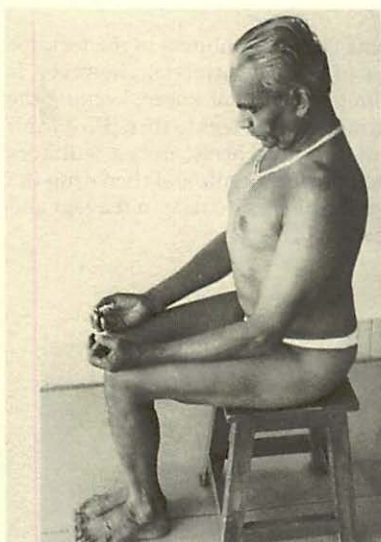
31. Jerky movements are a sign of fatigue, loss of attention or want of confidence. If they occur, do not waste time on prāṇāyāma, but practise asanas, which develop the lungs and quieten the nerves.

32. At the beginning adjustments for correct movements cause pain and discomfort, but with time and with regular practice these disappear. Practice for the day should be stopped when the pain or discomfort becomes severe and unbearable. This is a sign that the torso is correctly positioned for the practice of prāṇāyāma.

33. Learn to distinguish between the right and the wrong types of pain. The right pain occurs only while prāṇāyāma is being practised and disappears immediately after śavāsana. If the pain persists it is of the wrong type and will continue to irritate the sādḥaka, whereas the right type acts like a real friend, teaching fresh adjustments and adaptations, continually moulding the brain as well as the body.

Inability to Sit on the Floor

34. If through age, weakness or infirmity, sitting on the floor is impossible, a chair or stool may be used. But keep the feet flat on the floor, the thighs parallel with each other and parallel to the floor, and shins perpendicular to it (Pls 44 and 45). Keep the arms and legs relaxed, and free of all tensions, following all the points of this chapter as far as possible.

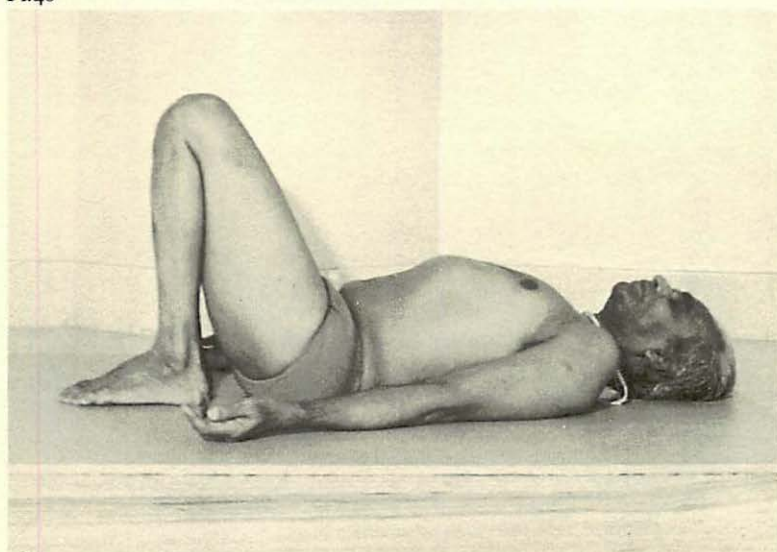


Pl.44



Pl.45

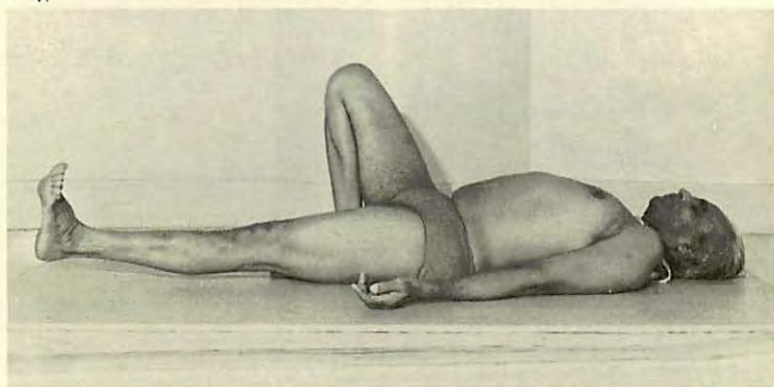
Pl.46



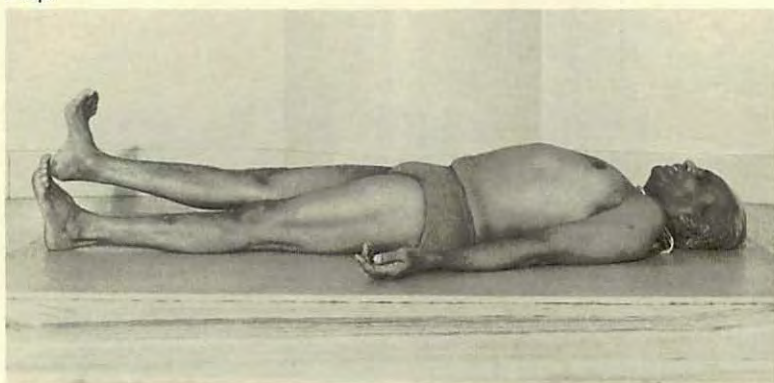
Numbness in the Feet

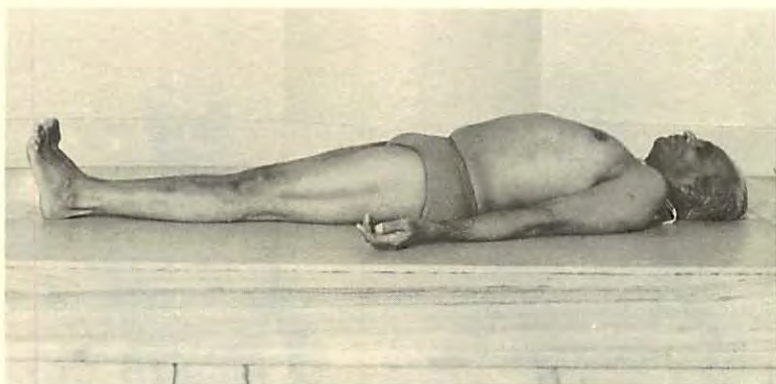
35. Sitting in any posture for prāṇāyāma causes numbness in the feet, for sitting in one position restricts the flow of blood. Correction, however, is easy. Do śavāsana for two or three minutes with bent knees, keeping the heels near the buttocks (Pl. 46). Then straighten the legs in turn (Pl. 47 and 48). Stretch the calf muscles, the back of the knees, heels, arches, with toes pointing to the ceiling (Pl. 49). Remain there for a while and then drop the feet to the sides (Pl. 50). This will make the blood circulate in the legs and the numbness of the feet will disappear.

Pl.47



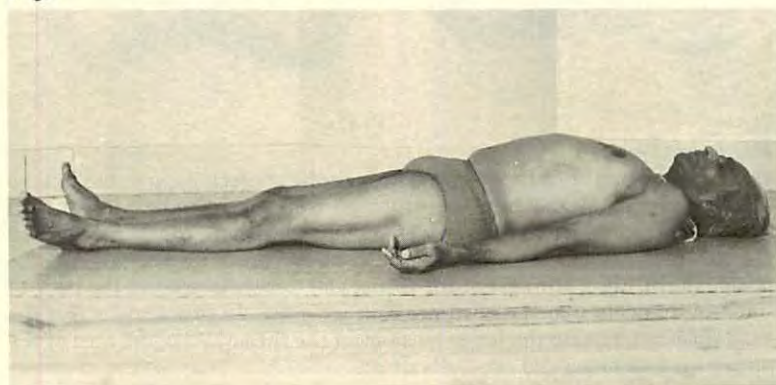
Pl.48





Pl.49

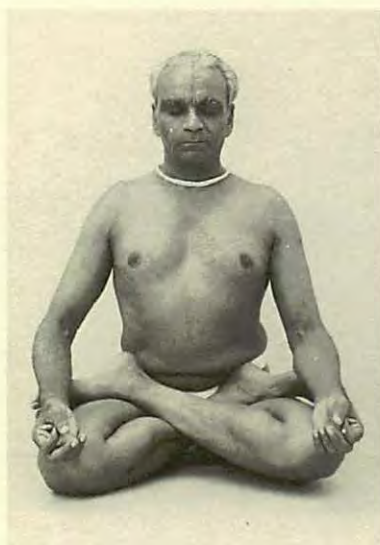
Pl.50



Arms and Shoulders

36. Spread the shoulders away from the neck on either side. Take them down as low as possible away from the lobes of the ears, and keep them parallel to the floor. The skin at the front of the armpits faces upwards, that at the back downwards. The shoulders tend to move up towards the ears during the practice of prāṇāyāma. Consciously and continually adjust them. This brings the elbows closer to the ground and ensures that the stretch and length of the upper arms at the front and back is even. Do not spread the elbows or move them up towards the shoulders (Pls 51 and 52).

37. The adjustment of the lower arms and placement of the fingers on the nostrils for certain types of prāṇāyāma are discussed in detail in Ch. 22.



Pl.51



Pl.52

Head and Throat

38. Except when lying down, never keep the head erect; form a chinlock, so that the crown of the head does not go up, but remains undisturbed throughout the practice of prāṇāyāma. This clears the subtle passages of the two nāḍīs at the sides of the bridge of the nose. Constriction at the bridge of the nose, stiffness of the throat and tightness around the back of the neck indicate that the head position is wrong. In order to correct the head position, release the inner tensions of the throat, relax the area of the upper lip and bring the eye-balls down.

39. Relax the skin of the skull and keep the nerves passive, so that the brain remains quiet and stable. Never tighten or raise the skin over the temples. Do not compress the lips, but keep them relaxed and passive with the corners soft.

Tongue

40. Keep the tongue passive and relaxed, resting on the lower palate. See that its tip does not touch the upper palate or the teeth. Do not clench the jaws nor move the tongue while inhaling, exhaling or holding the breath. If the tongue moves, saliva will flow. However, when you begin practising Prāṇāyāma saliva will flow and accumulate. Do not worry, but swallow it before taking a fresh breath. If you keep the tongue passive, the flow will stop gradually.

Nose

41. The nose regulates the flow and sound of breath. Keep the tip of the nose and the bridge between the eye-brows pointing to the sternum without tilting the head to the side. The tip of the nose tends to rise during inhalation, so be attentive and keep the bridge down deliberately. If the bridge or the tip of the nose moves up, the sound of breathing will be rough.

Eyes and Ears

42. The eyes control the fluctuations of the brain; the ears of the mind. They are the rivers that take the brain and the mind to the sea of the soul. Prāṇāyāma should be practised with eyes closed and motionless and ears receptive to the sound of breathing. Close the eyes gently, applying slight pressure on the pupils with the upper eye-lids, while keeping the lower lids passive. The eyes will then be soft. Do not let them harden and dry. Move the upper eye-lids towards the outer corners of the sockets, thus easing any tension of the skin at the inner corners near the bridge of the nose. Keep the pupils steady and equidistant from the bridge. Release the tension of the skin from the centre of the forehead, as this relieves the creases between the eye-brows and keeps the area passive.

43. At first it is difficult to master the art of sitting, for the body tilts unconsciously. Therefore, periodically open the eyes for a fraction of a second and check whether the body has sagged, the head is up or down or tilted to one side. Next, check tension in the throat and tautness of the facial skin, particularly around the temples. Lastly, find out whether the eyes are flickering or steady. Then adjust the body and head to correct positions, relax the throat and keep the eyes passive. When the muscles there relax so does the skin. The upper lips and the nostrils influence the working of the senses and organs. Relax the area of the upper lip, for this helps the facial muscles to relax and the brain too. While practising prāṇāyāma in a sitting position, if the skin around the temples moves towards the ears, it means that the brain is under pressure; if it moves towards the eyes, then the brain is at rest. In recumbant positions, the skin around the temples moves towards the ears and not towards the eyes.

44. Direct the vision inwards as if looking with closed eyes at something behind. It will seem as if the eyes are wide open, though the vision is directed inwards (Pls. 53 and 54). The pupils tend to move up and down as you breathe in and out. Try to stop this as their movement tends to create activity in the brain.

45. Dullness sets in once the eye-lids are loose; the moment the pupils start to flicker distraction arises. If the upper eye-lids contract, thoughts flicker like a flame in the wind. None of this takes place when completely relaxed.



Pl.53

Pl.54



46. If the eye-lashes do not meet, the brain is active and does not relax. If there is tension at the arch of the brows, the hair at this point will bristle as when angry; but if the brows are flat, the brain is at rest.

47. Keep the ear apertures level to each other and equidistant from the top of the shoulders. The ears must listen to the sound of breathing and feel light throughout practice. Do not clench the jaws as this will harden the area around the ears and block them, giving a sense of heaviness and itching inside.

48. Pay particular attention to the spot where the subtle energy channels (nāḍīs) from the eyes, ears and lungs criss-cross in the centre of the brain behind and between the eyes. This is the centre from which these energies are controlled. (See Ch. 5). This is where breath control starts.

Brain

49. The brain is a computer and an instrument of thinking. The mind has feeling, but not the brain. Since the brain controls the functions of the body and the organs of sense, it should be kept motionless. In Prāṇāyāma, it is the

inducer, not the actor but a witness. The lungs are the actors, the brain is the director.

50. If the sitting posture is correct, firm, steady and evenly balanced, the emotions are held in check. The brain feels light as if floating. Then no tension is felt there and hence no waste of energy. If there is an upward lift of the frontal brain, irritability and tensions are felt; if tilted to one side, the other side feels heavy, disturbing its equilibrium.

51. Intellectuals tend to be arrogant. Intelligence, like money, is a good servant but a bad master. When practising prāṇāyāma, the yogi bows his head low, adjusting the position of the front in relation to the back of the skull in order to make himself humble and without pride in his intellectual attainments.

52. The yogis know that the brain is the seat of acquiring objective knowledge (vidyā), while the mind (manas) is where subjective knowledge (buddhi) is experienced. Manas is the outer envelope, buddhi its content. Manas is located at the heart centre, where the emotional upheavals take place.

53. While both emotions and the intellect are silent and do not fluctuate, the yogi first experiences tranquillity of the senses followed by that of the mind. This is followed by the rarer and maturer experience of spiritual tranquillity, which frees him from worldly thoughts and cares. He becomes aware of the rare, pure state of being, a total awareness, the divine state in man. In it the finite merges in the infinite. This is samādhi, the endless goal of the yogi.