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EDITORIAL

There is something to be said of continuity in spiritual practice over long periods of time. We recently met Swami Satyananda Saraswati who was initiated into Chandi and the sacred fire ceremony, the yajna, as his primary system of sadhana, by his Guru. He practiced the recitation of the Chandi Path in the snows of the Himalayas and in the hot springs of Bakreshwar; performed the Sahasra Chandi Yajna (a thousand day worship of Chandi, without leaving the temple premises) seven times and attained to asana siddhi.

Swamiji, now keen on expanding asanas in Uttar Kashi wrote this. “We started with the Chandi Path in one asana, and then added the Bhagavad Gita. Then we added the Upasanghar Puja from Chandi, and now we are doing the Pancharatna Gita also.... 4:00 PM until 7:00 PM which will come close to ten hours for the day. This is our nitya karma.”

Ten hours a day in the same asana, day after day. He has attained asana siddhi. Now, what is asana siddhi (perfection of seat/ posture)?

We can look at this concept in two ways. Asana as physical posture in yoga and asana as a seat for long term meditation. Sri T. Krishnamacharya, the yoga expert, in an interview, defines asana siddhi, mastery over asana, as when “a person is able to be in a posture for a length of time with good breathing.

“All asanas (64 are enumerated as the main ones) cannot be mastered by any one individual. The fruits of asana siddhi are also very different. Perhaps in one, two, or [at] maximum twenty-four asana siddhi is possible. No more! It takes too much time and too much effort to do more. Further, the reason for learning yogasana is not just for good physique, but to obtain atmajnana [spiritual progress].”

Generally speaking, the term asana siddhi in hatha yoga is ability through mastery in one asana, to sit in a particular way with absolute ease. It's a state of perfect repose and relaxation, with no movement in any part thereof.

A yogi, be it Buddha or Lord Shiva himself, is seen sitting like that. Unmoving! Sthira! With no knowledge even of sensory and motor currents. In absolute bliss. Sukham! The last one is important too. Rarely is a mahatma or yogi said to have reached the highest state if a faint smile of blissfulness is not playing on his lips. Manda-smitam and prasannam!

Zen masters advocate 'just sitting'. To be able to 'just sit quietly' is beginning of any perfection. Both Patanjali and Sri Gita emphasise on practice (abhyasa) as a means to perfection. Practice makes perfect! Some say one can acquire asana siddhi or discipline in a year by practicing it regularly for two to six hours every day. This is a great truth that the modern man is missing. There is too much insistence on quick result, too little faith in prolonged effort.

A little effort is put in by the modern man and when there is no sign of result, perfection is defiled and the path held suspect. "All this is rubbish! There's no siddhi! There's nothing in this!" That's what they say out of sheer impatience. The fundamental offence, in any case, is lack of continuity. The sadhus in the Himalayas carefully observe a spiritual aspirant. They check if he or she is able to sit on the asana (the praying mat) for long periods of time—hours on end. If they are shaky or restless, fidgety or distracted, the sadhus remark: "Long way to go, abhi asana siddha nahin hua." This is quite telling.

To be able to sit steady for long is a grossly underrated capability. Whether its toddlers not being able to sit undistracted for food, or teenagers unable to study or office folks unable to spend time on the computer, it's the same problem.

But the impact of asana siddhi is enormous. Whoever manages to steady himself or herself is not too far from becoming a master. 'Space-and-time regularisation' is the pivot of siddhi. Constancy of effort in space and time is the key to success.

Slow and steady wins the race, so goes the old maxim. Well, the wise one did not use the word 'slow' to connote someone who is dull-witted or less-efficient, the 'slow' here simply means it's going to take long to win the race and if this fact is well-known, there will be no haste, there will be no discontinuation mid-course. You will go slowly, but you will go on...

Patanjali says the reward of asana siddhi is freedom from pairs of opposites (duality). The yogi is no longer bound by hot and cold, pleasure and pain, like and dislike, etc. and a higher level of consciousness is reached. This is not a small achievement. Overcoming pairs of opposites is actually winning a passport to the yogic hall of fame where equanimity, which is attained by overcoming pairs of opposites, is the key virtue. In effect we are saying if we can be steady, if we can sit at one place hour after hour, day after day, year after year, we can win everlasting bliss.

We have already seen that stability and relaxation (sthiram ad sukham) help us gain asana siddhi. The next is prayatna saithilya, or withdrawal of effort. Practice will train us and orient our body and mind in a desired direction. In the beginning it's tough to sit and meditate, but one has to ignore the discomfort and train oneself with effort. As time passes, the discomfort is gone. Thereafter, we need not interfere or exhaust ourselves with more effort. That's prayatna saithilya. It might be more

beneficial for us to withdraw the effort and flow.

It's like the cyclist going downhill. He will stop pedaling and come down swiftly. Without effort. Or perhaps because of lack of effort. That done, there is only one more process that remains viz. surrendering ourselves and our efforts to the Divine: ananta samapatibhyam.

After a great deal of practice and exertion, it's not that we simply stop exerting. The saithilya is not simply withdrawing, it's also merging with the Divine. At that level, the human exertions are withheld so that we can open ourselves to a higher possibility. That possibility is the descent of grace. The process is now complete. Tatah dvandwa ana-abhi-gatah – finally, the sadhaka reaches “asana siddhi” and passes beyond the pairs of opposites.

May we all attain firmness in our asana—physical and spiritual!

May we stay steadfast like Dhruva!

May the men come and go, but let's go on forever...

May the Mother earth, which is a great field (bhumir avapanam mahat), make our asana firm!

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The Editor

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