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PEACE, LOVE & LIGHT

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padmasana

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RELIEF POSES
for Carers

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SCRIPTURES

AMMA'S
TEACHINGS

The
niyamas

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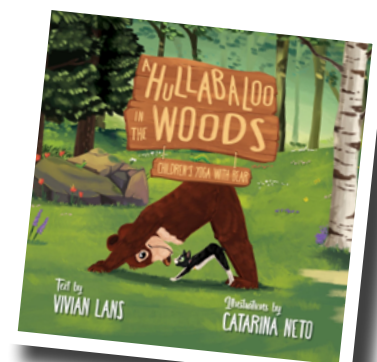
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संकल्पना व सजावट
विशाल राजनेकर

The Lotus SEAT, SYMBOL & SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

Words: Clare Gibson, Diploma Course Tutor for the British Wheel of Yoga

Step into the world of yoga, and you'll undoubtedly encounter *Padmāsana*, or the lotus posture, which has been synonymous with yoga and meditation for centuries. While you may be familiar with how to practice it, understanding its historic and symbolic importance can enrich your practice. Here, we delve into the significance of *Padmāsana* offering insight into why it has endured the test of time.

The history of the lotus is deeply rooted in spiritual and religious narratives from ancient texts. It features in creation stories involving Gods, Goddesses and the cycle of life. Across Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, the lotus is intricately linked to divine beings and philosophical concepts and permeates Eastern literature, art, and iconography.

Cultural significance

The lotus (*Nelumbo Nucifera*) is the national flower of India, it has large symmetrical petals and broad green leaves. It lives in fresh water and is equally at home in muddy lakes or shallow ponds, where it thrives, regenerating for thousands of years.¹ In India it has many names including Padma or Kamalā.

In Hindu mythology, the lotus is closely associated with the goddess *Lakṣmī*, also known as *Padmini*. In dedication to her, there is a beautiful garden and palace within Chittorgarh Fort Rajasthan. The palace is in the middle of a lotus lake and legend has it that *Padmini* was so beautiful men were only permitted to see her reflection in a mirror. If they looked at her face directly, they would die at the shock of her immense beauty.² Within the *Mahābhārata* it is said that *Lakṣmī* has a home within the lotus flowers themselves.



In the *Viṣṇu Purāna*³ there is a popular creation story that states whilst *Viṣṇu* was sleeping, a lotus flower sprouts from his navel, from which *Brahma* was born. Lotuses hold great significance in Hindu religious traditions and art. *Viṣṇu* is frequently depicted holding a lotus, and many other Hindu deities like *Lakṣmī*, *Sarasvatī*, and *Ganesh* are often shown seated or standing on lotus thrones.

Within the *Jain* tradition, The *Tirthaṅkaras* (the founders and great spiritual teachers of *Jainism*) are

depicted on thrones of lotus flowers. In *Buddhism*, *Buddha* is often referred to as the lotus of the heart. The *Mahāyāna* Buddhist text '*Lotus Sūtra*', uses the flowering of the lotus as a metaphor for *Buddha's* life and teachings.⁴ Some believe that with the birth of every *Buddhist*, an esoteric lotus bud emerges in the lake of paradise.⁵ In some *Buddhist* scriptures *Buddha* was said to be born with a symbol of a lotus on his feet and wherever he walked lotuses bloomed.⁶



The well-known mantra *om maṇipadme hūm*, is often translated as The Jewel in the Lotus. According to the 14th Dalai Lama, if, when on the path of life, we have clear intention and wisdom, we too can eventually achieve the pure body, speech and mind of a *Buddha*.⁷

Symbolic meaning

In many Eastern cultures, the lotus flower is seen as a symbol of spiritual enlightenment, purity and rebirth. Within several *Upaniṣads* the lotus represents deep and complex ideas about purity and the creation of life.

According to Stella Kramrisch the lotus is a symbol of transition.

‘With its roots in the mud, its stalk traversing the entire depth of the waters on which it rests, its leaves and flowers open to the light of heaven, the lotus belongs to this world and to those below and above, to light, earth and water’⁸

The *Bhagavadgītā* (Ch5 v10) highlights that living a pious life free from attachment and sin mirrors a lotus flower that is untouched by water which it repels from its leaves. Similarly, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (Ch8.v15) emphasises the importance of the lotus of the heart as the dwelling place of the Atman, or the true self.

‘As large as the universe outside, even so large is the universe within the lotus of the heart. Within it are heaven and earth, the sun, the moon, the lightning, and all the stars. What is in the macrocosm is in this microcosm.’⁹

One of the more renowned symbols represented by lotus flowers is that of the *Prāṇic* energy centres known as *cākras*. The modern symbolism of the rainbow *cakra* system depicts seven lotus flowers with differing numbers of petals within the *Prāṇic* body, aligned along the spine at specific points. Sir John Woodroffe, within his early text on *cākras* ‘the

Serpent Power’¹⁰ includes some beautiful images illustrating the *cākras* with their corresponding lotus flowers, each petal adorned with a *Sanskrit* symbol.

Padmāsana, a steady comfortable seat

For many yogis, the lotus pose is a deep hip-opening stretch that involves sitting cross-legged with both feet resting on top of the opposite thigh.

In the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, compiled by *Svātmārāma*, *Padmāsana* has seven verses dedicated to it. This famous Pan-Indic posture is also familiar within *Hinduism*, *Jainism* and *Buddhism* and has retained popularity throughout contemporary Western yoga.

Stepping back in history, the term *āsana* was considered as a stable seated position for the practice of meditation and *prāṇāyāma* (breathwork). Within the *Upaniṣads* sitting still was important as a stable body and a focused mind was required so that practitioners could realise *Brāhman* (God).

‘A man who knows *Brāhman* obtains the highest there is’ (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* Ch2 v1)¹¹

Within the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, we find the earliest mention of yoga relating to a stable upright posture. The text describes the importance of keeping the body straight, echoing the significance of a steady seated position.

‘When he keeps his body straight, with three sections erect’ (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* Ch 2 v8)¹²

The *Mahābhārata* reinforces this idea, likening meditation to sitting still as a piece of wood, emphasising the union of senses with the mind – the first stage of meditation¹³

A meditative seated posture is also synonymous with the *Buddha*. In *Aśvaghōṣha's* 200CE epic of the *Buddhas' life*, the *Buddhacarita*¹⁴. There is a description of *Siddhārtha Gautama* in a crossed-leg posture called *Paryāṅka*, which is akin to *Padmāsana*.¹⁵ It is in this position under the *bodhi* tree at *Bodha Gaya*, in the state of Bihar, India, that *Siddhārtha Gautama* gained enlightenment.

Many yogis will be familiar with yoga *sūtra* 2.46 '*sthira-sukham-āsanam*' indicating that the posture should be steady and comfortable. In The Vyasa commentary of the *Yoga Sūtras*, twelve seated postures are mentioned, one being *Padmāsana*.¹⁶ No detail is given on how to achieve these *āsana*, however, in the 8th Century text The *Pātañjalayogaśāstra Vivarna*, the author *Śankara* details how to master the twelve postures including *Padmāsana*.

'Pull the left foot towards oneself and place it on the right thigh. In the same way one should put the right foot on top of the left.'¹⁷

Padmāsana is named in other texts including the 9th Century tantric text the *Niśvāsātattvasamhitā*, and the Jain teacher *Hemacandra* also details the posture, stating that when the middle of one thigh touches the middle of the other 'the experts call it *Padmāsana*'.¹⁸

Lotus posture is also evident in the 12th C *Yogayājñavalkya*, this time with the arms crossed around the back holding the big toes.¹⁹ The *Gorakṣaśataka* states that the lotus posture destroys all sins and the 13th Century *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* proclaims.



'It destroys all diseases and is hard for anyone to attain; it is attained by the wise man in the world'²⁰

This is the first time that a specific *āsana* is credited with destroying disease. This could have started the swell of interest in yoga and its related health benefits. *Svātmārāma* accords the same benefit to *Padmāsana* within the *Haṭhpradīpikā*.

'Some call this *padmāsana*. It is the destroyer of all diseases. Only the wise on earth attain it.'

Additionally, *Svātmārāma* suggests that when one assumes the lotus posture and directs *apāna* (downward energy) upward and *prāṇa* (upward energy) downward, it can facilitate the awakening of vast

knowledge through the power of *kuṇḍalinī*, a spiritual energy believed to reside at the base of the spine.²¹

*BKS Iyengar*²² offers some other benefits of *padmāsana*, while giving the caution that at the start of practice the practitioner 'will feel excruciating pain around the knees'. He goes on to say that after the initial pain, it is one of the most relaxing postures.

As many contemporary practitioners are aware, lotus posture is often not comfortable at all and can put immense pressure on the hips and knees, due to the flexion, abduction and external rotation of the hips. Ray Long²³

states that if the posture is attempted by a person with tight internal hip rotators, then the rotational force could in turn injure the knees.

BKS Iyengar highlights that *padmāsana* can improve circulation and tone the spine and abdominal organs. *Satyananda Saraswati* author of the popular 1960's text *āsana prāṇāyāma Mudrā* and *Bandha* suggests that practising Lotus pose may tone the coccygeal and sacral nerves, enhancing the digestive system.²⁴

Despite varying unproven claims about its benefits, *padmāsana* is still the posture of choice for many contemporary yogis. Maybe as a seat in which to practice meditation and *Prāṇāyāma* or simply as an *āsana* demonstrating a mark of accomplishment in one's practice, its popularity endures.

It is evident that the lotus in its many forms has been and still is very important within both Eastern culture and the history of yoga. Beyond its spiritual significance, the beautiful plant serves practical purposes too. Within *Ayurveda* it is valued for its healing properties, in cooking it can be used as a delicious addition to many recipes, and within horticulture the Lotus is famed for its stunning floral displays.

The beautiful lotus and all that it symbolises has, without doubt, stood the test of time and will continue to be an inspiration for yoga and its practitioners for years to come.

Want to learn more?

If you are looking to deepen your knowledge of yoga, Clare Gibson is hosting an introductory day on 22nd September 2024 for those interested in teaching yoga. Full details here: <https://portal.bwy.org.uk/user/trainings/194>

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Clare is an experienced yoga teacher having trained with the British Wheel of Yoga in 2000. Since then, she has extended her knowledge with The Society of Yoga Practitioners (formerly known as the Krishnamacharya Healing Yoga Foundation) and is a registered yoga therapist with the Complementary Natural Health Council (CNHC).



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Further details can be found at: <https://www.harmonyoga.co.uk/>