

HANUMAN'S INFLUENCE ON YOGA ASANAS

MAYANK DHINGRA

IN INDIAN SACRED SCRIPTURES, HANUMAN is revered as the monkey-faced deity famous for his strength and devotion to Lord Rama. Hanuman was not only a central character in the *Ramayana* but also featured in the *Mahabharata* – the two famous epics of India which are classified as *itihāsas* under the *smṛiti* genus. Several yogasanas too are linked to the events in Hanuman's life.

According to legend, Hanuman was born into the apelike humanoid race of *Vanaras*. His father, Kesari, was a monkey chief and his mother, Anjana, was an *apsara* who was reborn as a monkey as the result of a curse. Sage Agastya, Lord Shiva and Pavan-deva, the wind god, played key roles in the events leading up to the birth of Hanuman.

Sage Agastya, pleased by Anjana's hospitality when he visited as a guest, granted Anjana the boon to have a mighty son who would be remembered for his valor and service. He asked Kesari and Anjana to pray to Lord Shiva to realize this blessing. Lord Shiva in turn was so delighted with their devotion that he decided to be reincarnated as their son; Pavan-deva helped carry a magical fruit and land it in Anjana's lap to complete the cycle set in motion and fulfill the boon.

ANJANEYASANA

AS A CHILD HANUMAN HAD A VORACIOUS appetite and Anjana had a difficult time keeping his hunger satisfied. One day Hanuman mistook the sun for a ripe mango and leaped towards it. At the same time Rahu, an often

inauspicious planet responsible for solar eclipses, was approaching the sun to swallow it. Hanuman clashed with Rahu and defeated him. A wounded Rahu approached Indra, the king of the devas, to help him. Indra set off on Airavata, his white elephant mount, to deal with Hanuman.

Hanuman knew no fear; as Indra approached, he took hold of Airavata's trunk and was about to fling him when an enraged Indra threw his weapon, the *vajra*, at Hanuman. The thunderbolt struck Hanuman on his jaw and he fell back towards the earth unconscious. This is how Hanuman got the name most commonly associated with him (*hanuman* means *broken jaw*).

Pavan-deva was furious at how grievously Hanuman had been injured; he whisked him away and hid in a cave in the netherworld. The world was bereft of air and the devas grew alarmed. They approached Pavan-deva to seek his pardon. Pavan-deva was not in a mood to forgive and rebuked the devas for the excessive use of force against a small child.

To appease Pavan, the devas offered to bless Hanuman with extraordinary powers. Indra blessed him with bodily strength and immunity to the effects of the *vajra* (thunderbolt) weapon. Brahma gave Hanuman two boons: he would be protected from any weapon in war and be able to change his form at will. From Shiva he obtained the boons of longevity, scriptural wisdom and the ability to cross the ocean. Varuna blessed baby Hanuman that he would always be protected from water. Agni blessed him with immunity to burning

by fire. Surya gave him two *siddhis* of yoga namely *laghima* and *garima*, enabling him to shrink or enlarge his form at will. Seeing his godson receive so many auspicious blessings, Pavan-deva relented and returned to earth along with Hanuman.

Anjaneyasana (*anjaneya* means *son of Anjana*) is dedicated to this story of Hanuman and represents his lunge to grab the sun. Hanuman took a powerful jump to reach the sun and similarly, on a physical level, the aspirant should enjoy a powerful stretch in the asana. On a metaphysical level, the quest for the sun can be understood as the pursuit of the spiritual source of energy and life. Soon after leaping for the sun, Hanuman asked Surya, the Sun God, to be his spiritual preceptor. Likewise, as the adept spreads his hands towards the sky in the pose he should seek a greater understanding of the self.

HANUMANASANA

WHEN HANUMAN FINISHED HIS studies with Surya he asked him what *Guru-dakshina* he could offer, how he could repay him. Surya asked him to go live with his son Sugriva and help him. Sugriva, together with a few followers, was hiding in the forest from his brother Vali, with whom he had had a falling out over kingship. While in the service of Sugriva, Hanuman met Ram and Lakshman who were also in exile and searching for Rama's wife Sita, who had been kidnapped by the demon King Ravana. Rama helped Sugriva gain his kingdom back from Vali and Sugriva in turn offered him

the assistance of his army and chief counselor Hanuman.

Hanuman's giant leap from the southern shore of India to Lanka in search of Sita is symbolized by Hanumanasana.

The *Sundarkand* section of the *Ramayana* describes Hanuman's leap: "In order to travel through the skies quickly, Hanuman, who had the power to increase his size at will, assumed a body of immense proportions. So great was the momentum of his leap that he carried along with him trees in full blossom uprooted by the force. Covered with different blossoms, buds and sprouts, Hanuman resembled a mountain himself. Soon the trees following Hanuman and the blossoms fell off into the sea making the ocean look even more beautiful."

Seeing Hanuman flying across the ocean, the ocean king asked Mainaka, the mountain hidden under the seas, to surface and provide relief to Hanuman by offering him a place to rest. Hanuman, who had taken a vow not to stop until he reached Lanka, politely declined Mainaka's offer.

The devas were very impressed with Hanuman's commitment but decided to test his determination for themselves. They asked Surasa, the mother of serpents, to take the dreadful form of a female *rakshasa* and try to obstruct Hanuman's way.

Surasa, opening her mouth wide, tried to eat Hanuman. Hanuman immediately doubled his size. Surasa in turn increased her size to match his. Hanuman again increased his size; this back and forth increase in size continued for a while. Finally, when Surasa increased the size of her mouth to accommodate a Hanuman of ninety *yojanas* (about 72 miles high), Hanuman swiftly shrank himself to the size of a human thumb, flew into her mouth and out from her ear, before she could react. Surasa, very impressed with Hanuman's intelligent handling of the situation, gave her blessings for his journey.

Hanuman continued on until suddenly he felt he was being dragged down. He was being attacked by the

demon Simhika who had the power to hold a person by his shadow. Hanuman first thought of trying to use his strength to fly away but soon realized the futility of the effort; he realized that he would have to go back and reclaim his shadow. As he flew towards Simhika, she opened her mouth to grab him. Hanuman again reduced his size at the last minute and went inside Simhika's mouth and came back out by slashing her vital organs. He was then able to continue his journey without further incident and reach Lanka.

In Anjaneyasana, as we straighten the leading leg and feel the first stretch to the hamstrings, it is tempting to just stay there and go no further since the rear leg is providing necessary stability and comfort – similar to how Hanuman's journey was interrupted by Mainaka who offered him a place to rest and tempted him with fresh fruits and food. But just as Hanuman brushed away the offer and stayed on course the practitioner has to continue ahead.

As you lift the knee of the rear leg off the floor you encounter your first 'monster' and you realize muscling your way through will only lead to injury. You need to start using your intuitive intelligence. Just as Hanuman shrank himself, you need to make micro-adjustments to go further and overcome this obstacle.

And finally to complete the journey, your thighs have to meet their shadows reflected below, just as Hanuman had to reclaim his shadow from Simhika. This last obstacle is the trickiest to overcome and requires patience and further micro-adjustments. Once the practitioner has mastered this last hurdle, he/she can continue with relative ease and raise the hands off the floor to complete the 'journey'.

UTKATASANA

WHEN HANUMAN ENTERED LANKA HE was surprised to see the splendor and beauty of the city. Vishwakarma, the architect to the gods, had created a city of unsurpassed magnificence which seemed to float in the air. After

a lengthy search, Hanuman managed to locate Sita in a glorious garden called Ashok Vatika and identified himself as Rama's emissary of by showing her Rama's ring. Sita was overjoyed to learn that Rama was searching for her high and low but refused to let Hanuman carry her back to safety, as it would be a disgrace to Rama to win her back through such surreptitious means rather than defeating Ravana in war.

Hanuman decided to meet Ravana to offer him a chance at peace. He realized the only way he could manage an audience with Ravana was to draw attention to himself; he started uprooting the trees in Ashok Vatika and destroying the garden.

Ravana's soldiers tried to capture Hanuman but were defeated. Ravana then sent his youngest son Akshayakumara to detain Hanuman but Akshayakumara was killed in the ensuing battle. An enraged Ravana asked his strongest son, Indrajit, to go defeat Hanuman.

After a prolonged battle Indrajit managed to capture Hanuman by using the divine weapon Brahmastra, which bound Hanuman. Hanuman was in fact immune to the powers of Brahmastra but out of deference to Brahma allowed himself to be caught.

On reaching Ravana's court, Hanuman requested a seat befitting the messenger of a king. A furious Ravana refused to offer him a seat or treat him as a royal emissary. Hanuman remained unperturbed. He lengthened and coiled his tail, making a seat for himself. Hanuman's seat was lofty and placed him higher than Ravana. This angered Ravana even more and he asked his soldiers to move his throne to a higher position. In response Hanuman made his tail grow longer, this game continued for a while and at the same time Hanuman made an impassioned plea to Ravana to return Sita and make peace with Rama. By this time Ravana was livid and asked his soldiers to kill Hanuman.

Ravana's brother Vibhishana intervened, reminding Ravana that a messenger should never be put to death. This would be against the rules of royal

conduct. Ravana could, however, punish Hanuman for his impunity. Ravana heeded his brother's words. He ordered that Hanuman be paraded through the streets of Lanka with his tail set on fire.

Having received the boon of immunity to fire from Agni and, in addition, through Sita's prayers for his safety, Hanuman remained unburned. Freeing himself from his captors, he ran about setting fire to Lanka, jumping from roof to roof.

Hanuman's encounter with Ravana is illustrated through Utkatasana. In English this pose is mistakenly called chair pose or awkward chair pose but the correct translation in Sanskrit (*utkata* means *fierce*) gives a better understanding of the essence of the pose. It symbolizes both Ravana's fierce attachment to his ego and his agitation at being unable to best Hanuman. Visually, the asana is similar to how a monkey appears when he jumps and the pose can be seen as a representation of Hanuman jumping from building to building setting Lanka on fire.

As the adept stabilizes himself in Utkatasana he should reflect on how we humans violently cling to our egos and the barriers and stress we create for ourselves by doing so. Sublimating the ego helps us not only to connect better with others and the universe but also brings a sense of serenity and peace.

When we manage to conquer or control our lower nature, which is nothing but a manifestation of the ego in myriad emotions like pride, greed, envy, etc., and let our higher nature shine through, we defeat our internal demons – our very own Ravana.

ADVASANA

ADHVA MEANS *PATH* IN SANSKRIT. THE story of Advasana has its roots in the *Mahabharata*.

During their period of exile, the Pandava brothers decided to visit the mythical Gandhamadana Mountain, purportedly located in the northernmost Himalayas, close to Mount Kailash. It is the adobe of several devas and a favored dwelling place of Hanuman. (Another Gandhamadana Mountain is situated

close to Rameshwaram in southern India. This is the same mountain from which Hanuman took his leap to Lanka in search of Sita.)

Gandhamadana was the site where the celestial sages Nara and Narayana performed severe penance and the woods in that area contained many exotic plants and flowers (*gandhamadana* means *intoxicating fragrance*). The Pandavas decided to rest there for a few weeks. One day Draupadi chanced upon a rare flower named Saugandhika and was mesmerized by its sweet fragrance. She asked Bhima to find some more Saugandhika flowers for her to give to the other brothers. Bhima was only too happy to oblige and set out in search.

Bhima went deeper and deeper into the forest but was unable to locate the flowers. In agitation he started uprooting trees and frightening the animals he came across. Hanuman, who was residing in the forest at that time, heard the ruckus and grew concerned about his brother's attitude. He realized that he would need to guide and protect him. (Both Hanuman and Bhima were born through the grace and divine assistance of Pavan-deva and hence are considered brothers).

Hanuman decided to teach Bhima a lesson; he changed his appearance to that of an old haggard monkey and lay on the path (*adhva*). When Bhima reached him he arrogantly asked him to move aside. Hanuman replied in a feeble voice that he was too weak to move and if Bhima needed to cross he could move Hanuman's tail aside and that would give him enough space to proceed. Bhima scoffed at the challenge but, to his shock, he was unable to lift the tail when he tried to pick it up. Bhima could not believe what was happening and tried using all his strength but the tail would not budge. He soon realized that he was in the presence of a higher divine being.

Realizing his mistake, he prostrated and asked the monkey to reveal his true self. Hanuman appeared before Bhima in his real form. He warned Bhima that the arrogance he was demonstrating due to his physical strength was a mistake that could cost him dearly

as he continued on his path towards the Saugandhika flowers which were guarded by Kuber's demons. He also advised him that to treat another being based on his appearance was shallow and not worthy of a noble prince like him.

Bhima acknowledged his mistakes and asked to be pardoned. He also asked Hanuman to show him the form he took to cross the ocean to Lanka. Hanuman obliged and grew himself to a gigantic size. Bhima stood in awe and Hanuman then reduced himself to his normal proportions and hugged Bhima. With that embrace Bhima felt a surge of strength and protective energy entering him. With Hanuman's blessings he continued on his way. He was able to overcome the obstacles and challenges that he encountered and successfully gather the Saugandhika flowers for Draupadi.

Hanuman, by physically obstructing Bhima's path, was able to enlighten him and help him reduce his pride and arrogance. Remembering this, the adept should aim to surrender his ego as he lies prostrate in the pose. Hanuman's complete surrender of his identity to Rama should be the inspiration as one assumes the asana. Mimicking Bhima's effort at lifting Hanuman's tail, the practitioner should attempt *vajramayasana* (*vajramay* translates as *hard as a diamond*). With arms extended out and feet pointed back, the adept should stiffen the muscles from the tips of the fingers to the toes and try and lift the body up a few inches. The attempt will be as futile as Bhima's exertion but the subsequent surrender will also be as complete as Bhima's renunciation of false pride.

VIRASANA

DUE TO HIS MANY ACTS OF VALOR and bravery, Hanuman is called Mahaveer in the *Ramayana*. *Mahaveer* translates as *most courageous*. Hanuman is also the presiding deity in the traditional Indian *akharas* or wrestling gymnasiums. He is venerated there as Bajrang Bali or the one whose limbs (*ang*) are as strong (*bali*) as a

thunderbolt (*vajra* or *bajra*). Amongst all his exploits of strength, one of the most interesting is his duel with his own son Makardhwaja.

During Ram and Lakshman's battle with Ravana, Ravana's brother Ahiravana managed to kidnap the brothers and hold them captive in his kingdom in Patala, the netherworld. He kept them unconscious by a powerful spell and wanted to sacrifice them at his altar at an auspicious hour. In hot pursuit of Ahiravan, Hanuman finds the entrance of Ahiravan's kingdom guarded by Makardhwaja, a mighty creature who is half vanara (ape) and half *makara* (reptile).

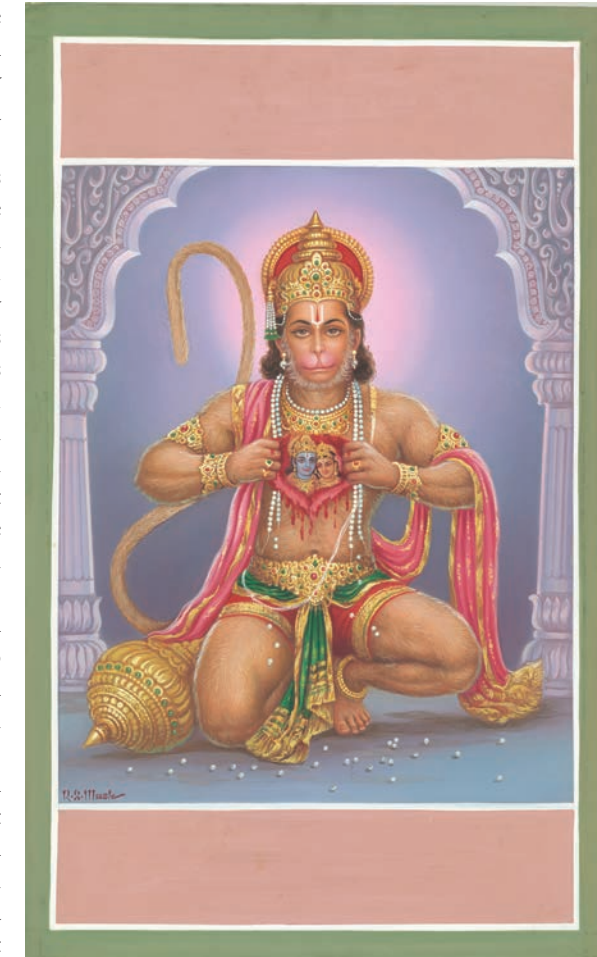
Makardhwaja introduces himself as Hanuman's son. He relates how, when Hanuman placed his tail into the ocean to douse the flames set by Ravana's soldiers, a drop of his sweat fell into the sea and was absorbed by a mighty reptilian fish; Makardhwaja was born as a result. He asks Hanuman for his blessings but states that he is duty-bound to guard the entrance and Hanuman can only enter by defeating him. A fierce battle ensues and Hanuman is finally able to vanquish Makardhwaja and rescue Ram and Lakshman from Ahiravan's clutches.

Hanuman is often depicted sitting in Virasana and it is the wrestler's favored pose when relaxing. When resting in Virasana, the yoga practitioner should reflect on the *Sundarkand* chapters from *Ramayana* which tell the story of Hanuman or recite the *Hanuman Chalisa*, a devotional hymn dedicated to Lord Hanuman.

HANUMAN IS CONSIDERED THE reincarnation of Lord Shiva – the original yogi. As such, his nature reflects many yogic traits. Besides the asanas his life story has inspired, he is also an embodiment of the first two limbs of the yogic path – the *yamas* (social

conduct) and *niyamas* (self-disciplines). His personification of the *niyamas* in particular is worth emulating for any yoga student.

The first *niyama* is *saucha*, cleanliness and purity. This represents not just physical cleanliness but elimination of our impurities like pride and arrogance. Despite his phenomenal physical strength and knowledge of many yogic siddhis, Hanuman always conducted himself with humility and grace.



since Surya's constant movement was not suitable for teaching, Hanuman decided to keep pace with Surya by facing him and constantly walking backwards in the rhythm set by the sun.

The fourth *niyama* is *swadhyaya*, study of the scriptures. Hanuman was an erudite scholar and grammarian. He mastered the four *Vedas*, the six systems of philosophy (*darshanas*), the sixty-four arts or *kalas* and the one hundred and eight occult mysteries of the *tantras*.

The fifth *niyama* is *Ivara pranidhana*, surrender of the self to God. Hanuman epitomized this *niyama* by his complete surrender to his divine master, Rama. He was completely immersed in his devotion to Rama and to prove his merged identity with the lord he tore open his chest to show Rama seated in his heart.

ANY STUDENT ON THE YOGA PATH would only deepen his practice by reading Hanuman's legend and understanding the significance and symbolism of his character. As Swami Sivananda wrote:

He had Bhakti, Sakti, Vidya and Seva-Bhava, Brahmacharya and Nishkamya-Bhava. He never boasted of His bravery and intelligence. He said to Ravana, "I am a humble messenger of Sri Rama. I have come here to serve Rama, to do His work. By the command of Lord Rama, I have come here. I am fearless, by the grace of Lord Rama. I am not afraid of death. I welcome it, if it comes while I am serving Lord Rama." Mark here how humble Hanuman was! How devoted He was to Lord Rama! He never said, "I am brave Hanuman. I can do anything and everything." ❀

Mayank Dhingra is a philanthropically inclined yoga teacher and a graduate of Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers. He is currently working on his book on Yoga Mythology. www.yogasmriti.com