

Phenomenological Writing – Protocol 1

“Paschimottanasana”

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It’s taken a long time to develop the discipline to maintain a “home practice.” Somehow it’s always been more reliable to rely on the Sangha, knowing that at a certain time each week my collaborators will all be meeting at the Studio to follow the instructions of our teacher who has organized a routine for our advancement. There’s also the added incentive to have paid up front for a season of courses, such that missing a week is then like wasting money. But the home practice has always remained elusive, sporadic, waiting in the future for a time when I have more fully embodied “the yoga.” Am I lazy? Insufficiently motivated? Let questions like these move to the past tense, for this is the season – in conjunction with my KA*753C “First-person Methodologies” study – to finally realize the fruits of a disciplined home practice.

The first asana for my Afternoon Routine – Version 1 is “Paschimottanasana,” otherwise known as “Back Stretching Pose” according to my manual *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, a manual compiled by the Bihar Yoga Center of India. Let me now enter the *epoche* and attempt to capture the essence of Paschimottanasana in a phenomenological protocol:

I find that the most difficult part of a yoga routine is mustering the determination to stop whatever I’m doing at the pre-appointed time and go get myself onto the mat. It’s almost like once I am on the mat I have no choice but to continue – and once the routine is underway a new sort of mind seems to take over ensuring that I will finish – so getting onto the mat is actually the first step of the routine. For that reason, I have the mat always unfurled on the floor as an open invitation to begin.

Everywhere I’ve been, a yoga routine has always started with a “prayer” – or at least an acknowledgement of some kind. This prayer seems to serve as a psychological threshold, or gateway, demarcating in time a sacred space for the sacred work that is about to commence. As I prepare for Paschimottanasana, I sit with my legs stretched forward and my back and neck as straight and tall as I can get them. Nobody sits like this normally, so as I assume this posture and sit with it a while I feel some forward momentum to begin the practice. Then I fold my hands in prayer mudra over my heart center and utter: “Divine Mercy, I make a commitment today to the Yoga, to my Liberation, to Freedom from a mundane human life” – or something to that effect.

The first stretch forward in Paschimottanasana always feels rusty – though in the afternoon the body is already limbered up compared to first thing in the morning! I bend forward and reach with my chest so that my arms will have maximum extension. My feet are together with my toes

spread wide. I am able to wrap my fingers around the side of each foot just below the little toe, and I hold it there. Now comes the breathing, a 12-breath count: in-breath, out-breath...1; in-breath, out-breath...2. I start to feel more space as I concentrate on what I'm doing. The next in-breath is deeper, the lungs expand so that on the out-breath I am able to reach a little farther than before: I am able to move my grasp down to the middle of my feet, and I hold it there. In-breath, out-breath...3. The muscles of my legs – I wish I knew the name of them – are now taught, especially where they connect right below the knee. I am able to play with this taughtness by firmly anchoring the back of my knees to the floor and pushing my heels slightly forward. Ahhh, there's a stretch. I wonder why they call this "Back Stretching Pose" when all of the action seems to be happening right below the knee? I finally reach the 12-breath count and raise my torso back up to erectness. One round.

As I prepare for the second round I take a deep breath inward and then slowly, purposefully reach forward attempting to extend further than before. I am able to grasp my feet closer to the heels now and am satisfied to stay with this little bit of progress. I return to the breath, oh so deliberately in and out. Since my legs seem to have maximum extension, I survey the rest of my body. From where my head is positioned I can see the top of my knees right below me. I wonder if I can touch my head to my knees? During the next out breath I reach with my forehead but there is some resistance *from my back!* It really is a back stretching pose! I am unsuccessful touching my head to my knees. On the next out-breath I try again. My whole body is into it now. With a little bit of surge I am able to touch my nose to my knee but am unable to hold it there. So much for progress, one deliberate step at a time. I take a deep breath in to close round 2.

On the last round of Paschimottanasana, I'm feeling pretty comfortable with the pose. I don't feel a need to push any more boundaries. I rest in the pose and breathe deeply, perhaps deeper than before. That is enough. As I concentrate on the breath to the point where it starts to feel automatic, self-pacing, I feel the space to begin thinking about other things. What was that conflict I was having? Where was I going to spend that next cheque? These wandering thoughts are soon truncated as I reach the twelfth breath of the third round. Paschimottanasana is over for today. It's time now to move on to the next asana of my routine.