

HOW MANY ASANAS ARE THERE?

There are as many asanas as there are species of creatures. Maheshvara [i.e., Shiva] knows all their varieties. Of the 84 lakhs, one representing each lakh has been cited and thus Shiva has enumerated 84 seats [*pitha*].

Goraksha Shatakam 5–6

The old yogis loved large numbers, even into the millions or billions. Such numbers create in us an immediate sense of wonder and awe and remind us how limited our everyday consciousness is when confronted by the immensities of the yoga universe. Of course, such numbers aren't to be taken literally. Like the 40 days and nights of rain Noah endured on his ark, these numbers signify that there's an awful lot of whatever

they're counting. Since we humans can't deal easily with extreme numbers, they're typically trimmed down through two or three steps to more human proportions.

One good example of this process starts with the total number of asanas. As we see in the epigraph, Goraksha tells us Shiva, the patron saint of Hatha Yoga, knows as many asanas as there are species of living creatures. How many is that? Eighty-four lakh, according to tradition, and since a lakh equals 100,000, that means there are 8.4 million divinely ordained asanas. Are you impressed? Or overwhelmed?

It's quite obvious that no human has any use for 8.4 million asanas, and so Shiva pared that number down to a way more manageable 84, one one-hundred-thousandth of the original number. There's no indication why these unnamed asanas were singled out, except that Shiva somehow determined they're preeminent (*visishtha*).²

The GS stops with the 32 "most useful" asanas, though it's not explained how or why they're so. The 32 are listed at GS 2.3–6, leaving us to wonder both about the names of the less useful 52 and, more relevant to our subject, if the number 32 has any significance (which we'll look at in this chapter).

Svatmarama in the HYP takes the paring one step farther, or maybe one step lower. He completes his asana chapter with the four he believes are the most excellent (*sarabhuta*) of all. Imagine. Start out with 8.4 million asanas, now just four are left, and once again, we have this number standing for something complete and excellent. In a way, this very small number is somehow just as remarkable as its source: all those millions and millions of asanas whittled down to these special few. So what are they? You might pause for a moment and speculate on what you think they are; there may be a surprise or two in what comes next.

We first should acknowledge that the Fab Four are all sitting poses—maybe one of those surprises I just mentioned. Most modern students, when asked to guess which poses are "most excellent," reveal their modern bias for active poses. We don't usually realize how central pranayama and meditation—performed while sitting—were to the traditional practice.

The best-known member of the four is one of the most iconic poses, Lotus (*padmasana*).³ There's no question why it's included. According to Svatmarama, it destroys sickness, bestows "unparalleled knowledge" from the power of the goddess, and sitting in this pose with breath restrained guarantees liberation "without a doubt" (*natra samshaya*), which seems overly optimistic.⁴

The next two poses are each a surprise in their own way. First we have Blessed Pose (*bhadrasana*),⁵ what today we call Bound Angle (*baddha konasana*). Blessed is something of a letdown after Lotus, as all it does is destroy disease. That's not a minor benefit surely, but nothing like its flowery companion's promise.

Then there's Lion Pose (*simhasana*),⁶ the one pose among the four that nobody ever guesses. Why this one? Svatmarama calls it "most elevated" (*uttama*) because it joins the three *bandhas*, the bonds at the throat (*jalandhara*), perineum (*mula*), and abdomen (*uddiyana*) essential for pranayama. Here with the inclusion of Lion, we see another example of the importance of formal breathing in the tradition. By the way, there's no mention in the text of the roaring sound that we create in the pose's modern version.

Finally the pose Svatmarama deems the best (*mukhya*) of all the asanas is Adept Pose (*siddhasana*). Fittingly, he devotes nine verses to this pose, more than any of the other 14 poses he includes in the text, even Lotus, which "only" rates six verses. Adept purifies the nadis (important as a prep for pranayama) and, like Lion, encourages the three *bandhas*, but most of all (along with meditating on the Self and eating a moderate diet), the pose with regular practice after just 12 years, "opens the door to liberation."⁷

► ► BEHIND THE NUMBERS

How Many Asanas Are There in Modern Yoga?

While we modern yogis come up a bit short of 8.4 million asanas, we still have a pretty fair number to keep us occupied. I have a copy of the *Encyclopaedia of Traditional Asanas*, compiled by the Lonavla Yoga

Institute of Lonavla, India, published in 2006. The editors surveyed 160 texts and manuscripts, both ancient and modern (but not Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*), and according to the book's dust cover, came up with "approximately 900 titles of asanas." We also have *Light on Yoga*, which includes 198 asanas (and two mudras). It's safe to say then that we have access to at least a thousand asanas, likely more.

▶ ▶ BEHIND THE NUMBERS

84 in Sanskrit

Eighty-four in Sanskrit is *caturashiti*.

We might ask: what's the significance of 84, if any? According to S. Dasgupta, "it has been rightly held by some scholars that this number eighty-four is rather a mystic than a historical number."⁸ For examples, he notes that the Ajivikas believe the soul must pass through 840,000 stages before becoming human, that the MaiU⁹ and some Puranas mention the same number of states of birth, and that the Kanphata yogis sometimes have rosaries (*mala*) with 84 beads instead of the customary 108. Gudrun Bühnemann, in her comprehensive review of *Eighty-four Asanas in Yoga*, notes that the number "signifies completeness, and in some cases, sacredness."¹⁰

Some writers try to explain the import of 84 by pointing out that it's a product of other recognizably symbolic or sacred numbers. Seven times 12 is quite popular. For John Campbell Oman in *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India* (1905), seven represents the number of so-called "classical planets" in Indian astrology (the Sun and Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn), and 12, the number of signs in the zodiac. What the asanas have to do with astrology though, isn't explained. Matthew Kapstein gives seven and 12 a slightly different spin, noting that from a "numerological point of view," both are related to three and four, the former as the sum of the two numbers ($3 + 4 = 7$), the latter as the product ($3 \times 4 = 12$). By then multiplying the sum by the product, we arrive at our 84. Kapstein remarks that symbolically 84 "encompasses the range of possible relationships obtaining among

the innumerable magical and natural categories involving threes and fours,” though unfortunately he doesn’t provide any specific examples. However from a “historical perspective,” he concludes, 84 is “entirely arbitrary.”¹¹

▶ ▶ BEHIND THE NUMBERS

32 in Sanskrit

Thirty-two in Sanskrit is *dvatrimshat*.

Symbolically, 32 isn’t your typical meaning-laden number, like, say, nine or 12, nor does it seem to be significantly related in any way to any other number of recognized significance, like 72, 84, or 108. I did turn up one curious parallel though. In the first chapter of the HYP, we have Svātmarama’s roster of the 32 great adepts (*maha siddhas*).¹² This is a lineage of yogis—beginning with the “first lord,” Shiva—who’ve “broken Time’s staff” (*kala danda*, an emblem of the god of death, Yama) and freely wander about in Brahma’s egg (*brahma anda*, see p. 33); in other words, they’ve conquered both time (and so death) and space. Does the 32 in Svātmarama have an echo in the 32 of Gheranda? The latter certainly was familiar with the former, since descriptions of half-dozen asanas in the GS are the same or very close to those in the earlier text (e.g., compare HYP 1.32 with GS 2.19). Could the choice of 32 asanas be a subtle tribute to the 32 adepts? This is probably just wishful thinking on my part, and anyway, and even if true, it just switches the question about the number to a different text.