

HATHA YOGA

Memorandum

By Basile Catoméris

The Hatha Yoga path (Yoga Sadhana) is the legitimate child of Ashtanga Yoga – the eight-fold Yoga and is issued, like Mantra Yoga, Laya Yoga and Raja Yoga, from the original form of Yoga i.e. Maha Yoga.

Hatha Yoga is no religion, speculative philosophy or alternative medicine (although it is well-known for strengthening immunity to disease).

With no institutionalized structure at its disposal, it has in any case survived the vicissitudes of time, the illusion of attractive theories as well as the plethora of fashion- and time-bound methods that pretend to solve existential issues.

Hatha Yoga, but for whom?

Hatha Yoga is an ancient holistic spiritual path that originally in its homeland India, addressed healthy and well-balanced people endowed with a genuine call for spirituality, prepared as they were to give up a comfortable social life, loving family and friends, to live a solitary life, ready to undertake sacrifices of different kinds.

In India these would-be yogis were and as can be seen, still are the elite of the society. These rare souls are, indeed, the aristocrats, noble “outlaws” of India. They are men “of goodwill” *par excellence*, aspiring solely to realize the highest spiritual ideal. These exceptional beings have long travelled on the ocean of worldliness. They now feel ready to undertake Man’s perhaps

highest challenge – the conquest of immortality, a supreme union into the Unnamed. And these spiritual seekers are able by their example to inspire people from all over the world.

Hatha Yoga

Hatha Yoga is too often presented as a substitute system for gymnastics, which, backed up with some rules on diet, fasting and cleansing, aim at man's well-being, improving his capability to relax and to concentrate his mind, etc. Such an objective is of course worth aiming at, but we should not forget that Hatha Yoga provides, traditionally, far higher goals, than helping man to stay healthy and happy, efficient in his daily work or providing renewed energy to meet everyday requirements.

A serious practice of yoga pre-supposes the practice of *yama* and *niyama*. These two practices consist of ten physical, intellectual and ethical rules. They are essential in the practice of those students, whose ambitions are not confined to purely physical results.

The first of these ten rules is:

(Ahimsa (harmlessness)): Which means doing no harm either physically, by words or even in thought to others living beings. This important practice deserves our special attention, because it is, in fact, the very key for achieving real and lasting peace, for the individual in particular, and for Mankind in general.

Non-violence is well-known in modern times as a very different weapon successfully handled by Mahatma Gandhi in giving India her independence after more than one century of colonial rule.

The yogis say that when *ahimsa* is practiced regularly and devotedly, its negativity, as expressed in the initiating letter "a" to mean: non-, becomes positivity. From being non-violence at the initial stage, *ahimsa* thus develops into a neutral feeling, tolerance, sympathy, compassion leading ultimately to a universal love, a feeling which extends to all living beings including plants. It is sheer illusion to think that man could ever love his neighbors at will, or whenever commanded to.

Satya (*truthfulness*): That is, to speak the truth and to act in a truthful manner.

Asteya (*non-stealing*): Which in the broadest sense means refraining even from stealing other people's ideas.

Bramacharya (*sexual control*): A control which when completed relates to both the conscious and non-conscious aspects of our lives - in action, speech and thought.

Aparigraha (*non-acquisitiveness*): Means refraining from what is superfluous to one's natural and basic needs.

Shoucha (*cleanliness*): A rule which embraces both the outer and the inner aspects of the body. Under this heading also dietetic foods and fasting are included.

Santosha (*contentment*): The cultivation of a positive feeling in our life is intimately connected with our inner Being.

Tapasya (asceticism): In the Hatha yogic practice this relates in the first place to the physical aspect where will power is carried over and beyond the physical and mental limits; there is also a general practice of tapas as well as verbal and mental tapas in which the practice of silence plays an important role.

Svadhya (*spiritual study and mantra exercises*): These include the study of Holy Scriptures and the japa mantra practice.

Ishvara Pranidhana (*concentration associated with deep feeling towards God*): In that practice surrender to Godhead become a very important factor in the student's practice.

Following these 10 rules is *asana*. These psycho-physical exercises technically consist of a process aiming at the control of the whole skeletal musculature to develop the body in a harmonious and symmetrical way. This occurs by the application of dynamic and static exercises, by developing the flexibility of the body, speed, strength and endurance.

Pranayama: This practice consists in various breathing processes with or without the use of mantras.

Prathyara : This is the last preparatory exercise before the practice of concentration proper. Prathyahara can adequately be described as the withdrawal of the senses from outer objects.

Dharana/Dhyana/Samadhi: These are the very concentration processes with

their various phases. They come as a last stage in the eight-fold path (ashtanga yoga) to succeed the preceding exercises which are traditionally considered to be of great help, if not indispensable, to the Hatha yogi but also to other people where man's ambition is directed towards Knowledge of the Self, a knowledge which in fact involves a full control of the senses and of the mind.

Samadhi

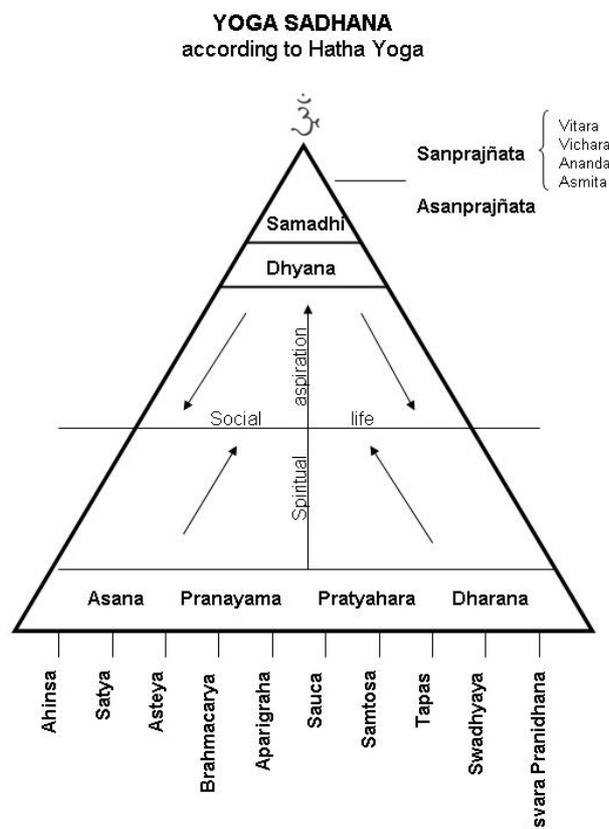
The final achievement of Yoga sadhana (spiritual path) leads the *sadhak* to samadhi which, at its highest level (asamprajnata Samadhi), manifests itself technically as :

- The highest form of control (*sangyama*)
- The deepest expression of mental concentration (*samadhi*)
- The perfect union (*sanyoga*)

Contemporary Yoga

Modern *sadhaks* (Yoga student) often choose the "middle-way" as a compromising path that harmoniously combines mundane life and spiritual ambitions, keeping thus one foot in the stream of modern life and the other in the centripetal forces of spirituality. As an ideal of life, many will have adopted the concept of excellence, traditionally called *deva dehe*.

But yogic tradition teaches that to qualify for the rather difficult way of living, a Guru is a must.



Guru – The dispeller of darkness

India has a tradition of various kinds of gurus. The Kularnava Tantra mentions six kinds of gurus.

In general, we may expect a genuine guru to be:

- Egoless
- Competent and experienced
- Not attached to material things
- Displaying evidence of equanimity with mental balance

Inspired by his (or her) knowledge, experience and presence, a guru will be

respectful of the inherited yogic tradition and his own guru's teachings, and also capable of transferring his knowledge and experiences in an appropriate manner to deserving *sadhaks*.

These are expected to display certain qualities for their noble purpose: devotion, purity of heart, determination, regularity in practice, a good dose of non attachment and unselfishness.

Yoga Sadhana worst enemy lies in a mechanistic approach to it in particular routinely executed exercises, where inertia (*tamas*) predominates. Each and every workout should be done, as if for the first time.

Also, attachment to the memory of yesterday and/or unnecessary projections in the future are fatal to real "here and now" achievements. Each time is *sadhana* to be done with a fresh approach and as if it was the last chance given to practice. Best results are found in those who are positive from the outset, or emotionally involved from the outset.

What are the first manifest signs of a life directed towards *deva dehe*?

- The complete elimination of tongue coating
- No foul mouth and bad breath nor unpleasant body odours
- Natural and regular bowel motions
- Sound sleep
- Feeling of strength, inner calmness and joy.

Sex and Spirituality

All spiritual paths and religions have acknowledged the tremendous importance of sex in human life. Indian scriptures (*shastras*) have defined three main aims of life (*Purushartas* or *Trivarga*), namely :

- Artha, the acquisition of wealth, arts and sciences
- Dharma, following individual and collective rules for maintaining the right order in Life
- Kâma - the satisfaction of desires; pleasure.

The fourth purpose, i.e. liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*moksha*) depends essentially on how the three former are being carried out.

In the Rig Veda *kâma* as sex power has been described as the first seed of mind, the root of all creativity.

To all human beings - including *sadhaks* - the control of sex power is a great challenge. Its yogic prerequisites are sexual vigor backed up by a fair physique. When spirituality is underdeveloped these prerequisites may lead to sexual excesses.

At a higher stage of control advanced sexual control as a part of Hatha Yoga *sadhana* becomes the link to Raja Yoga - the so called royal path to liberation.

Read more about Raja Yoga in the text "Know thyself"