

HATHA YOGA

Hatha yoga is a small part of an ancient and vast philosophical system. Hatha yoga, or asana (posture) practice, deals with strengthening and toning major muscle groups as well as deeper muscles that maintain the alignment and health of the spine and joints, and also encourages proper functioning of internal organs, resulting in overall health and wellbeing.

The value of practicing hatha yoga lies in its inherent power to rejuvenate the body and free the mind from tension and fatigue. The practice of hatha yoga reaches deeply into the body and mind bringing about balance and integration of the body, mind, and spirit. By maintaining a balance of strength, flexibility and relaxation in our practice as well as our daily life we are able to fully experience the expression of the creative life force that we are.

All *eight limbs** of the yogic system are intrinsically woven together and to commence with the practice of even one, such as hatha yoga, most assuredly will lead to realization of another, or several, or all. It is a journey that, once embarked upon, cannot be relinquished, and will progress to its ultimate fulfillment.



Beyond Asana

*The *eight limbs* work together: The first five are concerned with the body and the mind and are the preliminaries of yoga and build the foundation for spiritual life. The last three are concerned with restructuring the condition of the mind.

Yama ~ Yama is social behavior, how you treat others and the world around you. These are moral principles, sometimes called restraints. Yamas can be experienced or expressed on three levels: mental, verbal and physical.

- ॐ **Non-violence** (*ahimsa*). Considered to be the greatest of the yamas. Do no harm to any creature in thought or deed; treat all sentient beings, all Life, with benevolence and compassion.
- ॐ **Non-lying** (*satya*). Not lying to yourself or others.
- ॐ **Non-stealing** (*asteya*). Do not take anything that is not ours; material or intangibles such as someone's happiness, moment of prominence or their dream.
- ॐ **Non-sensuality** (*brahmacharya*). The practice of brahmacharya is harnessing and directing the desire to create and procreate we

experience as humans in a balanced way. Brahmacharya is about proper use of the creative forces of our being and seeing the divinity in all beings.

- ॐ **Non-possessiveness** (aparigraha). Freedom from greed, hoarding, collecting; making your life as simple as possible. Do you hoard thoughts in your mind that long ago lost their usefulness? Do you greedily try to take too much from an asana and end up hurting yourself?

Niyama ~ Niyama is inner discipline and responsibility, how we treat ourselves; sometimes called observances, these are conducts that need no restraint or limitation. Niyamas can be experienced or expressed on three levels: mental, verbal and physical.

- ॐ **Purity** (shauca). Holding the mind to noble and ethical thoughts and feelings; respect for the power of words; bodily cleanliness.
- ॐ **Contentment** (santosha). Cultivate contentment and tranquility by finding happiness with what you have and who you are. Seek happiness in the moment, take responsibility for where you are, and choose to grow from there.
- ॐ **Austerity** (tapas). Show discipline in body, speech, and mind. The purpose of developing self-discipline is to control and direct the mind and body for higher spiritual aims or purposes, not necessarily to become ascetic.
- ॐ **Self-Study** (svadhyaya). Through reflection and self-study we can determine how our mind has been affected by our life experiences and how our thoughts affect our life. If the mind is clear and disciplined it can be our greatest asset, if not it is our greatest challenges.
- ॐ **Attunement to Life** (ishvara-pranidhana). Attuning your thoughts, words and actions to your most noble and sacred concept of divinity.

Asana ~ Ancient yogis used *asana* to prepare the body for meditation, though Westerners often consider the practice of asana or postures as an exercise regimen or a way to stay fit. To sit for a lengthy time in contemplation and meditation requires a supple and cooperative body. Postures free the body and mind from tension and restlessness and in and of itself asana can be a most contemplative and meditative practice.

Pranayama ~ *Prana* is the life force or energy that exists everywhere and flows through each of us through the breath. Pranayama is the awareness and control of movement of the breath. The basic movements of pranayama are inhalation, retention of breath, and exhalation. The quality of the breath affects our nervous system and body chemistry as well as our mental and emotional states.

Pratyahara ~ *Pratyahara* is withdrawal of the senses. Any time when you are directing your attention inward, pratyahara occurs. This can be during meditation, breathing exercises, or the practice of yoga postures. When you master pratyahara, you are able to focus inward without outward distractions.

Dharana ~ *Concentration* or *dharana* involves teaching the mind to focus on one point or image. The goal is to still the mind, gently letting go of superfluous thoughts, keeping your mind on an object such as a candle flame or a flower. In dharana, concentration is effortless. You know the mind is concentrating when there is no sense of time passing.

Dhyana ~ Uninterrupted *meditation* without an object focused upon is called *dhyana*. Concentration leads to the state of meditation. The goal of meditation is heightened awareness and oneness with the universe, not unconsciousness or nothingness. If there is awareness of distraction, you are concentrating and not meditating. The calm achieved in meditation will flow into all aspects of your life.

Samadhi ~ The ultimate goal of the eightfold path to yoga is *samadhi* or *absolute bliss*. This is pure contemplation, super consciousness, in which you and the universe are one. Those who have achieved samadhi are called enlightened. Samadhi has been called the state of God-Union.

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