

Hatha Yoga & the Seven Vital Principles

Based on Orit Sen Gupta's opening talk at the 2018 Vijnana Yoga Convention. Translated and edited by Lisa Kremer.

We are living at the time of a worldwide renaissance of yoga. This reawakening is thanks to the lineage of teachers and students who passed on their knowledge and love of practice from one to another to this very day. I think of my teachers, well-known teachers such as BKS Iyengar and Patabhi Jois, who I, along with many others, had the great luck to study with personally. I think of teachers at whose feet I sat for many years. Teachers such as Dona Holleman who taught me the subtleties and secrets of asana and Dr. Vijay Pratap who through personal example showed me dedication to practice, day in and day out, and how a teacher supports and nurtures students, a quality that should not be taken for granted. My mentors and community during my formative time at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry also come to mind—people who demonstrated complete devotion to practice in a matter-of-fact manner, as if such utter dedication goes without saying. This is the lineage that brings us to this moment.

Now I wish to talk about the connection between classical yogic texts and the Seven Vital Principles of Vijnana yoga, and with the help of the seminal text *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* to show the deep logic and thought behind the principles. When we speak of hatha yoga today, we mainly think of asana—perhaps a bit about breath, and maybe about chanting *ohm* at the beginning of class, but primarily asana. Yet what were the practices of classical hatha yoga? In the Sutras, Upanishads, and other texts we see mentions of breath and asana. But in the 1300s something happens: a phenomenon called hatha yoga arises on the yogic timeline. This phenomenon ripens in 1500 when Swatma-Rama composes the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. What characterized the worldview of these hatha yoga practitioners? What did they wish to express? What was important for them to teach? And to pass on?

I will provide a bit of background regarding this point in yogic history. Around the year 1300 tantra was developing in Buddhism as well as Hinduism. This was expressed through an interest in chakras—that is, meditation, concentration, visualization, and mantra with attention to chakras and the subtle body as central to the meditative path to samadhi. Out of this practice a new idea arose among the yogis: They realized that meditation practices alone are not enough. They realized that in order to stabilize samadhi; in order to fix the consciousness in a quiet and wide state for a period of time; in order bring yoga to a kind of perfection, physical practices such as asana, *kumbhaka*,

and mudra (mudra meaning *bandhas* of the body like *mahamudra*) are necessary. These yogis—the first hatha yogis—propagated a new yoga that included physical practices. For them these physical practices did not stand alone but were part of a complete method of hatha yoga as described by Swatma-Rama in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. Reading *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, we are exposed to a particular version of the yamas and niyamas that adhere to a meticulous diet and lifestyle; a very long chapter on samadhi; and a description of physical practices. All are integral to the complete practice of hatha yoga, with the ultimate goal of sustaining samadhi.

This helps us understand the first part of shloka 76 of the second chapter of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*: “It is impossible to gain perfection in Raja Yoga without Hatha Yoga...” Swatma-Rama defines raja yoga as the state of mind of samadhi or wide consciousness; and we have already discussed physical yogic practices. Swatma-Rama’s statement is a clear teaching of hatha yoga: We need asana, pranayama, and mudras/bandhas to stabilize or gain perfection in samadhi or raja yoga.

This was a radical idea, but the entire shloka is even more radical: “It is impossible to gain perfection in Raja Yoga without Hatha Yoga, or to achieve perfection in Hatha Yoga without Raja Yoga. And so, one must practice both of them until perfection is achieved.” (*Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, II.76) How does Swatma-Rama’s statement stand up to the widely accepted idea of a graduated process of levels or steps along the yogic path? In his time, and even today, many in India and the West hold that the practitioner must first practice asana before the next stage of pranayama, and only in more advanced stages is the practitioner ready for meditation and samadhi.

Swatma-Rama turns this outlook on its head: By stating that it is impossible to achieve perfection in hatha yoga without the practice of raja yoga, and vice versa, he makes it clear that together raja and hatha yoga form a complete, indivisible method. Without physical and breathing practices it is impossible to stabilize the wide, quiet state of consciousness of samadhi. And without quieting the mind it is impossible to achieve perfection in asana. In order to bring the process of yoga to perfection, we must persevere in both practices. This stance is clarified when we experience the influence of these particular practices on us as practitioners.

A simplistic understanding could maintain that certain practices strengthen and refine the body, while other practices sharpen and quiet the mind. But with experience we understand that this does not hold true. Runners, for example, know the extent to which the mind changes during the course of a run. And while breathing exercises do strengthen the core muscles and improve the ability of the practitioner to breathe,

breathing practices have more than a physical effect. Those who have practiced pranayama even minimally notice how refining the breath quiets and calms the mind. At first glance, sitting and meditation may be regarded as primarily mental and spiritual. In sitting we learn to hear inner voices without being swept away by them; we learn to focus the mind. Yet at the same time we experience the positive effect of the sitting position on the body. With precise posture the vertebrae of the spinal column arrange themselves in an optimal position one on top of the other. Sitting is also calming and in this way is good for our health.

The deep understanding that, together, physical and mental practices bring about wholeness, perfection, and stability of the body and mind flows forth from a vision of a person as a single, indivisible body-mind unit. In my mind, this is the most important understanding that Swatma-Rama brings us.

The Seven Vital Principles of Vijnana yoga spring forth out of this outlook and form a clear method for practicing the classical, holistic yoga method described by Swatma-Rama. The first three principles are principles that may be traditionally classified as raja yoga in that they are principles of wide consciousness: relaxation, quieting the mind, and intention. All three involve directing attention rather than doing. With relaxation there is freedom from stress and a letting go that enables quieting the mind. Relaxation creates a space for the consciousness to go inside and quiet down. And this, in turn, enables the third principle of intention.

These first three principles can be called upon and created in any situation, but their presence is crucial to the practice of asana. The wide consciousness engendered by these principles allows the body to discover asana from within and stabilize within it, just as purusha the Seer, in the presence of prakriti the seen, enables the self-realization of prakriti.

To get to know the remaining four principles we must delve into the essence of the first principle—relaxation. To this end I turn to commentary on the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* on asana. Sutras II.46-47 of the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* state that with relaxation of effort and *samapati* (merging) with the infinite the asana is stable and pleasant. Although the original order of the sutras first mentions the asana as being stable and pleasant (II.46), and only then relaxation and merging with the infinite (II.47), I refer to the sutras in this revised order because at the outset of his commentary, Vyasa states that the condition for a stable and pleasant asana is the relaxation of effort and/or samapati with the infinite.

It is natural to assume that to achieve asana we must first make an effort and then relax that effort. This almost goes without saying because learning an asana demands a certain degree of effort. Yet one of Vyasa's commentators, Vacaspati Misra, takes a different stance:

According to Vācaspati Mīśra asana emerges out of relaxing effort. Therefore the natural effort of the body cannot bring about asana. Further he maintains that this natural bodily effort even hinders asana, and practitioners should suppress this natural effort, otherwise asana will not be achieved. It is for this very reason that relaxing the natural effort of the body is said to be the means of achieving asana. Another method is through the mind, transformed into the idea of the infinite as Ananta the great serpent who upholds the earth by means of his very steady thousand heads and brings about steadiness.

What comprises the effort that relaxes the natural effort to which Vacaspati Misra refers? I have been contemplating this question of late because a number of serious practitioners searched deeply in their own bodies for the principle of relaxation and went too far to over-relaxation to the point of limpness. That, of course, is not the intention. In order to allow the body to be relaxed in and beyond the posture, there must be an axis, a continuum, around which we can relax all unnecessary effort. Clothing hung on a hangar hangs relaxed without collapsing and falling limply to the ground. Finding the correct posture (alignment) of the body, or the optimal placement of the body's vertical axis, is finding the inner hangar.

To find this alignment we create balance between the front and back of the body on the vertical axis of the skeleton. Using the breath and vayus we direct gentle exhalations towards the areas of the belly button, heart, and base of the throat to create pranic alignment. These directed gentle exhalations—inner vayus—clarify our center by reorganizing the areas of the belly, chest, and head on the axis that connects them—the spinal column. Sticking to this hangar or axis enables the relaxation of natural effort described by Vacaspati Misra. This perseverance is the effort that will transform the natural effort and allow pleasant, stable posture.

When we truly experience relaxation, our vision widens. Our gaze is not only directed towards the central axis but also to the outer edges of the body and our contact with the earth. And so, when the quiet mind directs its gaze to the body, the remaining four principles—rooting and connecting, breath and elongation—come into play.

Relaxation combined with stabilizing around the center of the body through the vayus as well as attention to the touch of the earth allows rooting to occur. And a feeling of connecting to the center of the body flows forth from the intensity that arises in the body from rooting. Breathing while maintaining the pleasant posture of the body creates elongation. In this way all of the principles are connected to each other and activate one another. It is imperative to practice all of them to perfection.

The goal in practice is for every part of the body to be placed correctly in relation to the organs connected to it, and for the entire body to move as one unit while protecting this place of postural quiet. As long as we are loyal to this quality of posture and to a feeling of pleasantness in the body, we will not feel pressure in the joints. During transitions the body organizes itself according to the following rule: the body is attentive to the pleasantness of the posture and does not go against this pleasantness. In order to protect this pleasant way of being the body conditions itself to gentle transitions during movement. In this way the practice transforms from a place where we actively move parts of the body from here to there with effort in order to do this or that pose, to a place where we listen from inside to the pleasant posture and attempt to protect it in every position and in transitions as we move from position to position.

I would like to conclude with an important point: This type of body-mind work is not verbal. The language of the meeting between body and wide consciousness is a different language. The principles are a compass, pointing the way for our attention and helping us understand the sensations we discover during practice. The mind is attentive to the touch of the ground, pausing to taste and savor the different flavors of touch. The mind is attentive to the connection to the center and enjoys the flavor of this connection. The mind is attentive to inhalation, exhalation.

Who encompasses who? Who directs the attention of whom? Attention to subtle and subtler sensations gently accompanies and guides sitting, breath, and posture. Echoes of sensations touch the consciousness and the consciousness examines these sensations. At the same time adjustments of rooting and connection occur in the body effortlessly and organically. In the language of the mind-body meeting, movements do not proceed one after the other in a predetermined grammatical sequence. Understanding and movement occur simultaneously, in a very natural and yet strange oneness.