

The Hatha Yogis

The Body: An Appreciation

Hatha yoga as we know it flourished in the Postclassical Period, thanks in large part to a change in the climate of thought of the times. One of the distinctive elements of the Postclassical Period is that the sages set forth a new and increasingly dynamic view of the universe, and because of the new attitude toward the human body that came with this view, hatha yoga burst forth at the forefront of this period.

In the Classical as well as the Preclassic Periods the body had been roundly reviled as an enemy of the spirit, a source of spiritual confusion and defilement. A good example of this attitude comes from a passage in the *Maitrayaniya-Upanishad*:

“In this ill-smelling, unsubstantial body, a conglomerate of bone, skin, sinew, muscle, marrow, flesh, semen, blood, mucus, tears, rheum, feces, urine, wind, bile, and phlegm – what good is the enjoyment of desires? In this body, which is afflicted with desire, anger, greed, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from the desirable, union with the undesirable, hunger, thirst, senility, death, disease, sorrow and the like – what good is the enjoyment of desires?”⁸

In sharp contrast to this, with the Postclassical Period came the realization that the human body is unique and indispensable to the spiritual quest. The *Kularnava Tantra* responds:

Without the body, how can the [highest] human goal be realized? Therefore, having acquired a bodily abode, one should perform meritorious (punya) actions. (1.18)

Among the 840,000 types of embodied beings, the knowledge of Reality cannot be acquired except through a human body. (1.14)⁹

Another Tantrika named Bhogar, a seventeenth century adept, wrote the following:

Time was when I despised the body;
But then I saw the God within.
The body, I realized, is the Lord's temple;
And so I began preserving it with care infinite.¹⁰

Notice that these sages did not dismiss the pitfalls of desire, nor did they deny the weaknesses and inescapable foulness of the fleshy and emission-prone body. Rather they emphasized the more important positive value of the body as the means of realization. The sages of Hatha Yoga went so far as to hold forth the possibility of transforming – even transubstantiating – the body into one which they called “adamantine” (*vajra*) and “divine” (*daiva*), a body that was *not* made of frail flesh and bone, but of immortal Light.

These masters honored the embodied state, but in their own experience did not think of the body as merely the mortal physical organism through which they lived and spoke for a time. Their experience of the body – like their experience of the Self – was much greater. Just as through yoga the individual spirit transcends the limited sense of self to recognize its true nature as the Self, this realization also transforms the body, since the body is nothing other than the expression of Spirit. As he experiences it, the realized Master's body is

8 The Yoga Tradition by Georg Feuerstein, p. 382

9 *ibid.*, p. 382

10 *ibid.*, p. 384

really the Body of All, and so he is free to assume any form at all, and to influence the processes of nature according to his will as easily as he moves his own body.

Because they saw no radical dichotomy between Self and Body, their understanding of the body was as organic as their view of Spirit. We are all within this one divine reality, this divine body – not as separate, divided, dismembered and discrete beings (as in the original legend of *Prajapati*), but as organic members or interpenetrating cells of a single cosmic body more deeply interfused with Spirit. The universe, which is nothing but the Lord, is not a fragmented and disjointed collection of objects, but a genuine uni-verse, a One that is Many, a single network of life or ‘body’ in which each member participates in the life of the Whole.

With this view came an expanded and very profoundly effective view of healing that matured into the science of Ayurveda. The sages known as the Nathas were famous healers, attuned to curing the whole person in their approach to disease. They understood that an illness cannot be cured as a separate entity, it must be treated in a larger framework, as part of a complete being. Part of the revolution specific to the Natha Masters was the appreciation of how profoundly our physical well being depends on our spiritual health – both as individuals and as a community and a World. Thus we find a greater stress on the *kula* or community in the quest for enlightenment, rather than on realization as a solitary quest, a departure from community and company.

The Tantric Masters who pursued the ideal of the adamantine body, or transfigured body of Light, came to be known as the *Siddhas* – the “accomplished” or “perfected” Masters. They flourished between the eighth and twelfth centuries, and played a pivotal role in synthesizing the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The ‘Siddhas’ figure as prominently in the Tibetan Buddhism of the Far East as in the Hindu schools of India, and so the movement spanned cultures and religious beliefs.

The Natha Siddhas of Hatha Yoga

The most important schools of the Siddha movement were those of the Nathas (who had their home in the north of India, particularly Bengal) and the Maheshvaras (from the South). The Hatha Yoga tradition is credited to the **Natha Siddhas** of the north – Goraksha Natha and his teacher Matsyendra Natha, both of whom were born in Bengal. ‘Natha’ means ‘lord’ or ‘master,’ and refers to one who enjoys both liberation (*mukti*) and worldly enjoyments (*bhukti* – albeit transformed through their yogic discipline and understanding), as well as paranormal powers or *siddhis*. Hence ‘Natha’ or ‘nath’ is often added to the name of sages affiliated with this movement.

Matsyendra was a chief representative of the Nathas, and quite possibly the originator of Nathism. He is specifically associated with the Kaula sect of the Siddha movement, and, while he is also said to have founded other tantric clans, is largely regarded as a reformer who transformed the older (more cultish) Kula tradition into a ‘reformed’ Kaulism. Matsyendra described himself as an adherent of the sectarian Siddha Kaula, the founder of the Yogini Kaula and revealer of the original hatha-yogic doctrine of ‘Matsyodara.’ His work was a watershed for the tantric and Siddha traditions, and was the precursor of the hatha yoga of later Natha Siddhas who claimed Matsyendra as their founder and inspiration. The great sage Abhinavagupta singles out Matsyendra for praise in the opening lines of his *Tantraloka*, and incorporates the practices of Matsyendra’s Yogini Kaula into the practices of the Kula System of his Trika philosophy.¹¹

Matsyendra’s school of Nathas shared a central emphasis on the *kula*, which in its greatest sense is the emphasis upon reverence for the dynamic or feminine aspect of Reality or the *Shakti*. This concerned specifically

11 The Alchemical Body by David Gordon White, p. 88-89

and especially *Shakti* in the form of the *Kundalini Shakti*, the transformative aspect of the divine creative power – the power of grace that is at the heart of their discipline. *Kula* also meant “home” or “family,” which suggests that the initiates into this order enjoyed a special and protected status set apart from everyone else. More expansive interpretations of *kula* – as we have seen – are possible and even merited, but *kula* in the context of the Natha yogis did carry this more exclusive (and rather ‘clubby’) meaning.

Matsyendra’s chief disciple was **Goraksha**, who lived in the late tenth and early eleventh century, and is remembered as a miracle worker second to none. Though he apparently came from a lower – if not the lowest – caste, he was a charismatic teacher who wielded a great deal of social influence as he traveled throughout India, and his fame far exceeded that of his teacher Matsyendra. The poet-saint Kabir, who generally had little good to say of the yogis of his day, praised Goraksha as well as his later successors Bhartrihari and Gopicandra as masters who had found union with the Divine. He also acknowledged his debt to them for their teachings on the chakras and the Yoga of sound, having to do with mantra.

Goraksha is often given sole credit for the invention of hatha yoga, though many of the teachings and practices had been in existence from long before his time. Goraksha founded the Kanphata (‘Split-ear’) order of the Nathas, whose members are also known as ‘*jogis*.’ They are to this day recognized by their practice of splitting their earlobes to insert large rings for purposes related to their practices.¹²

The Texts of Hatha Yoga

In yogic literature there are a number of reliable texts on hatha yoga. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* by Yogi Swatmarama is the first that is always cited. Gorakhnath himself is credited with the *Goraksha Sambhita*. A third text is *Gherand Sambhita* by the sage Gherand. Besides these there is a fourth major text known as *Hatharatnavali* which was written later by Srinivasabhata Mahayogindra. All these texts are considered to have been written between the 6th and 15th centuries A.D.

As we noted earlier, the ‘tantric’ practices of hatha yoga do go further back than these texts; there are minor references to hatha yoga in the ancient Upanishads and Puranas, as well as references to the practices in tantric texts that predate those Upanishads. However, the systematic form of hatha yoga began to emerge in India some time in the 6th century A.D.

The Influence of Buddhism, and the Hatha Yogis’ Response

The Buddha was born in India in the 6th century B.C., as well as Mahavir, the founder of the Jain sect. Both of them performed severe austerities and both also preached non-violence. The Buddha formulated his teachings in the form of the ‘Four Noble Truths’. The Buddha laid a basic foundation for practice called the ‘Eightfold Path’, which was a system of ethics more or less like the *yama* and *niyama* of raja yoga. Two systems of Buddhism followed, one of which is known as *vipassana* and the other is *anapanasati*, ‘contemplation’.

As a result of Buddha’s popularity, meditation became the main form of spiritual practice on the entire subcontinent. At the same time, preparatory practices relating to the body were ignored, and ethics and morality were emphasized – and to the minds of some, very much overemphasized. Over time the sages of India began to reassess Buddha’s system, agreeing that meditation is indeed the highest path, but questioning the idea that one can start meditation immediately. Instead they came to believe that a good deal of preparation is involved – and the practices of yoga were just such a preparation.

Five hundred years after Buddha, and one hundred years before Christ, in India, at Nalanda in Bihar, a university was established in the Buddhist tradition, devoted to the Hinayana system. *Hinayana* means the

12 *The Yoga Tradition* by Georg Feuerstein, p. 386

‘narrow path’, i.e. the orthodox Buddhist system. Many thousands of students from all over the known world came to study there.

However, there was another group amongst the Buddhists who did not agree with the orthodox interpretation of the teachings, arguing that it was not what Buddha himself had preached. So they established another university called Vikram Shila in Bihar, which became the teaching center of the Mahayana tradition. *Mahayana* means ‘great path’. They were not orthodox Buddhists, but more ‘liberal’ Buddhists. In that Mahayana tradition they also began to include tantra. This was not something that the Buddha had explicitly taught, so the orthodox Buddhists did not believe in it. It didn’t help matters that from the Vikram Shila a sect arose known as *Sahajayana*, the ‘spontaneous way’, and *Vajrayana*, which includes the sexual practices between men and women.

After about five hundred years or so, the popularity and influence of Buddhism declined and so did these tantric sects and their practices. Then in the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries A.D., after the period of Buddhist decadence in India, some yogis set out to reform the tantric system and restore it to its original purity.

Matsyendranath, Gorakhnath and a few other yogis in the tradition found that certain crucial practices in the tradition were being ignored by some and wrongly taught by others. So they separated the ‘hatha yoga’ and the ‘raja yoga’ practices of tantra from the rest and left out the rituals of tantra altogether, not even mentioning them.

When they culled the practices, they picked up the useful, practical and noble practices of yoga from the tantric system. It was at this time that Matsyendranath founded the ‘Nath’ cult, which held the belief that, before taking to the practices of meditation, you must purify the body and its elements. This became the overall theme of hatha yoga.

Of the many authorities on hatha yoga, one outstanding personality is Swatmarama who compiled the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. The term *Pradipika* means ‘self-illuminating’ or ‘that which illumines’. It is a text that illumines a number of physical, mental and spiritual problems confronting aspirants.

Gorakhnath, the chief disciple of Matsyendranath, had earlier written books, poems and prose on the hatha yoga system in the local dialect, but Swatmarama compiled the entire wisdom of hatha yoga in Sanskrit. In common with the other texts, he has expounded techniques such as asana, pranayama and shatkarma.

The Primacy of Ethics Reconsidered

What is **most striking** about the texts of the hatha yogis is that, in the process of revisiting the practices of yoga, Swatmarama completely eliminated the yama (moral codes) and niyama (self-restraints) which were the starting points in the Buddhist and Jain systems, as well as in Patanjali’s yoga!

The similarities between Patanjali’s eightfold path or *ashtanga yoga* and the Buddhist’s teachings have long been noted, and it is entirely reasonable to think that Patanjali was deeply influenced by the Buddhists. Indian thought during the period of Classical Yoga as a whole was very much in dialogue with and response to the Buddhists. Particularly the analytical slant that Samkhya Yoga took on so strongly in the Classical Period is widely recognized as a response to the intellectual challenge posed by Buddhist dialectics.

Patanjali was a contemporary of Buddha and it’s fair to say that his system of yoga was influenced by the Buddhist philosophy of yama and niyama. Patanjali’s contention is that you have to first perfect yama and niyama, otherwise asana and pranayama may fail to lead us to samadhi, the goal of yoga as he saw it. This is entirely in keeping with Buddhist thought, which saw the path to spirituality as beginning necessarily with high ethical ideals.

In the Postclassical Period, the sages of Hatha Yoga began to seriously reconsider this view. They saw that the attempt to practice self-control and discipline according to the high ideals and strict rule of the yamas and niyamas can create an inner conflict and disharmony within one's own personality.

In short, a system that *begins* with ideals of spiritual perfection sets up a duality from the start, because these ideals set forth a goal that divides us against ourselves. For instance, there are yoga teachers who, on this model, argue that you cannot consistently or genuinely practice yoga or 'be' a yogi without being nonviolent, which they interpret to mean that one *must* be a vegetarian.¹³ For many who practice yoga, this presents a conflict from the start that leads them either to seek a compromise that they can live with, or ignore the point with a sense of guilt.

Overall, yoga is often full of people 'trying' to be spiritual – and the *trying* indicates a dualism and conflict that one may never quite overcome. As long as we are *trying* to be spiritual, we are painfully aware that we *are not* spiritual – the goal is always just beyond our reach. This is not to suggest that we just give up on morality because it is just too hard; rather, the very dualistic nature of a philosophy that begins with strict and often unreachable moral ideals can only lead to disharmony and inner conflicts of conscience rather than wholeness.

The Tantrikas, on the other hand, would rather we begin with the understanding that we *are inherently* spiritual, and we have but to fully unfold the Spirit that we are; there are no pre-requisites for being what we already *are*. In this way they began from a more nondualistic standpoint in setting aside ideal precepts that define precisely what we are not, and instead beginning with purification at its most fundamental, in order to allow what we are to shine forth.

In the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* the first thing we see is that Swatmarama does not worry about self-control and self-discipline in the form of yama and niyama. He orders the approach to practice very differently, beginning by saying that you should first purify the whole body - the stomach, intestines, nervous system and other systems. Thus, shatkarma comes first, i.e. neti, dhauti, basti, kapalbhathi, trataka and nauli – with the recognition that the use of these practices is relative to one's physical condition. Not everyone is equally 'impure' physically, and so not everyone has to start with the cleansing practices of swallowing a cloth and so on. For many, the practice of the asanas is enough.

After shatkarma comes asana and pranayama. Again, the point is eminently practical: self-control and self-discipline start with the body, largely because that is much easier. To remain steady in an asana or in a pranayama practice is a great self-discipline, and we can imagine Swatmarama wondering aloud why we would start our yoga by fighting with the mind first – the most difficult of battles, and largely misguided, since it only leads to antagonism and animosity towards oneself.

So the masters of hatha yoga began with the discipline of the body, and explained what they meant by the body. Far beyond just the physical body of muscle and bone, the subtle elements (tattwas) the energy channels (nadis) are to be purified through the practices of asana and pranayama, so that the behavior of the prana or vital force, the entire nervous system and the organic or chemical balance in the body could be properly maintained and harmonized. After this there followed the practices of mudra that made it possible to deepen meditation through inducing pratyahara, which leads into dharana, dhyana and samadhi.

13 I myself am, by the way, a vegetarian.