

WHAT IS HATHA YOGA?

It's a mystery, exactly what happens inside when we do hatha yoga. Most hatha yogis are pretty clear about their practice, yet I think most would allow that there is far more to be felt, known and understood. It's a mystery that begins with the attempt to define what our practice is all about.

Definition, while never complete, is nevertheless a good place to start. In hatha yoga we practice what is called asana, a Sanskrit word that, like many Sanskrit terms, defies precise translation. Like most yogic concepts, asana refers to a highly refined experience that underlies its unassuming appearance.

THE MEANING OF ASANA

What is an asana? Its most literal meaning is "seat," a firm positioning of the body. Most of us are familiar with at least some of the shapes into which the yogi extends and twists his body. Our minimalist definition thus might easily be that asana means a specific positioning of the body performed for an intrinsic purpose (i.e. not just for show).

This is a start, but more could be said -- first about how the body is positioned, and second about what this purpose might be.

To be more specific about how the body is worked, we could say that asana involves positioning and working the body in ways that stretch and strengthen not only the major muscle groups, but also the deeper postural muscles that maintain the health of the joints and spine. Asana also stimulates and encourages the proper functioning of all of the internal organs that govern our essential life functions.

How to find a word that does justice to that? We have come up with some English equivalents, but they fall short of expressing how asana contributes to our overall health.

One word often used in place of asana is "posture." An asana is a posture, a disposition of the body and its limbs. Whether standing, sitting, folding forward, bending over backward or even standing on one's head -- 'posture' gets the gist of this idea across. But the word 'posture' nevertheless suggests little more than an accustomed way of being, one that involves habit and unconsciousness. We're rarely conscious of our posture until someone else comments upon it, or we catch a sideways glance at ourselves in a window. Asana isn't like that at all. We choose to practice asanas in a sequential order, giving full attention to what we are doing and how we are doing it, and with a clear intention to benefit from it. 'Posture' doesn't quite capture the conscious intentionality of asana to promote health and well-being.

Neither does the word 'pose.' Like posture, a 'pose' suggests something static and artificial. Asanas aren't really static, though we may gain that impression from pictures in books on yoga. Asana involves a stream or flow of breath, muscular effort and even movement, which at its apex (the 'pose' we recognize as the 'asana' proper) does appear quite still. Asana is not just that momentary result; it's the process by which we arrive at the result.

So asana is no less a sustained effort and flowing movement as it is a state of inner stillness -- of being 'seated' or established in a firm position. It balances effort -- the act of moving or flowing with the energy of the pose -- with quietude, a soft and silent openness to an inner experience of expansion, joy and ease which, when it comes, is felt as a moment of grace. This is the essential insight into asana that is distinctive of Anusara Yoga.



THE PURPOSE OF ASANA

Which brings us to the purpose of asana. Yoga is usually described as a discipline that combines exercises with relaxation techniques to form a complete system of self-care designed to rejuvenate the body and free the mind from tension and fatigue. This suggests that the asanas of hatha yoga reach far more deeply into the body – and mind – than most forms of physical exercise. Athletic training, by contrast, emphasizes working the outer muscles of the body, building the exterior frame often at the expense of the inner body – the inner organs and deeper muscles that keep the structure of the body aligned and functioning well. This becomes an issue when people who train almost exclusively in a sport or narrow range of related sports develop chronic problems, usually having to do with joint deterioration and postural problems. Yoga has the opposite effect, which is why many people turn to yoga to prevent or heal sports and exercise related injuries.

Hatha yoga encourages attention to the inner body – i.e. proper alignment of the inner structure of the bones as well as attention to the health of the inner organs – as much as it works the outer sheath of muscle. For that reason it differs both physically and philosophically from other forms of exercise. Hatha yoga operates on a more comprehensive idea of health than fitness, and a broader understanding of strength than just physical power. Yoga develops our awareness of the inner body and encouraging us to work from the core of our being, not just from the surface. The basic premise is that when we are able to contact and work from that core, we achieve a much deeper and more abiding health, which includes emotional and even spiritual health well-being.

HEALTH AS WHOLENESS

This is because asana establishes integrity in our being -- integration of body, heart and mind. The word “integrity” comes from the Latin *integrare*, which means to renew or restore. The purpose of asana is renewal or restoration of the body's original wholeness. Hatha yoga has been practiced for 6000 years because of the inevitable bumps and bruises, not to mention the stress and tension, of everyday life. Given the rapid acceleration of modern life, this makes hatha yoga even more a necessity today. Because of such challenges, maintaining our health – our wholeness or ‘togetherness’ – is always a work in progress. Through the asanas of hatha yoga we keep up with life by maintaining a balance of strength, flexibility and relaxation – a balance of effort and graceful ease, not just in our practice, but in our daily approach to life.

...AND ATTITUDE

The art of living well with the help of yoga really comes down to attitude. One respect in which the word ‘posture’ is a good translation of asana is that it suggests the primacy of attitude. Our posture is the outer form of an inner attitude, molded in flesh and bone. The physical details of posture are really secondary to attitude, because no matter how much you may ‘correct’ your posture, the body always returns to the shape suggested to it by your mood or mental focus.

And yet, our physical life is not simply dictated by our mental life; nor is our mental life to be changed by just ‘positive thinking’ or affirmations alone (a difficult option, for anyone who has tried it). Working consistently with your posture can be a means of beginning to subtly transform your attitude, changing your own deepest feeling about yourself as well as your orientation toward your world.