

# ***Yoga and Meditation: Their Origins and Real Purpose***

**By Stephen Knapp**

First of all, yoga is not a religion, it is a spiritual science that has been practiced and developed over thousands of years. Archeological evidence shows figures in yogic positions from the Indus Valley region that date as far back as 3000 BCE. Yoga is also mentioned in various Vedic literature, such as some of the *Upanishads*, including the *Katha*, *Svetashvatara*, *Taittiriya*, and *Maitrayani*, as well as the *Bhagavad-gita*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, and others, all of which date back thousands of years. Therefore, yoga, which is essentially theistic, was known many years before Patanjali. Although he is often given the credit for it, he merely codified it in his *Yoga Sutras*, which is the text many people are aware of, and which is said to have been written somewhere between the fourth century BCE and the fourth century CE. In this way, it should be clear to anyone that yoga and meditation have their origins in the Vedic system, which some call Hinduism.

Furthermore, hatha yoga is described in such early texts as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* by Yogi Swatmarama, the *Gheranda Samhita* by the sage Gherand, and the *Shiva Samhita*. Lord Shiva is said to be the originator of the system found in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. This is highly regarded by the Nath tradition founded by Gorakshnath and his teacher Matyendranath, who was accepted to be a disciple of Lord Shiva. Yogi Gorakshnath wrote the *Goraksha Samhita*. A later text on yoga is known as the *Hatharatnavali* by Srinivasabhata Mahayogindra. Thus, without this ancient culture, there would be no yoga process as we know it today.

In the Vedic tradition, yoga is the system which is the application of the Sankhya system. The Sankhya philosophy is another of the Vedic systems. The original Sankhya system, as explained in *Srimad-Bhagavatam* by Lord Kapila, acknowledges matter and spirit as two separate principles of reality. Sankhya analyzed such factors as *purusha* and *prakriti* (spirit and matter), the creation and development of matter through excitation of the *purusha*, how the world evolved, how the modes of nature operate and affect us, how *ahankara* (false ego) causes our identification with matter and bondage to the material world, the five organs of action and five senses of perception, the subtle elements, the gross elements, etc. The goal of this system is to understand that the real self is eternal and free, but because of ignorance the soul identifies with what is temporary and, therefore, suffers. Through this kind of analysis of the material world it is expected that one will realize the difference between matter and spirit and attain

freedom from false identification. After this stage is attained, release from existence in the material world is reached through spiritual training, meditation on the real self and Superself, and the practice of yoga.

In this way, Sankhya is the theory, while yoga is the practice. The complete system of yoga is very complex and has many steps to it, each of which must be perfected before one can go on to the next step.

Hatha yoga is one of the first types of yoga with which people become acquainted. However, it is not a separate system of yoga as many people seem to think. It is one of the eight steps of raja or astanga yoga. Nonetheless, it can be used separately if only for helping keep the body and mind fit and in shape.

The word *hatha* consists of two *bija* or seed mantras, namely *ha* (prana) and *tha* (the mind or mental energy). *Ha* means the *prana* or energy flowing within the body and that associated with the sun, while *tha* means the mind or mental energy, or that associated with the moon. Thus, *hatha* means to bring in balance the energies of the sun and moon, or unify the vital energy of the body with the mental. This opens the door to higher consciousness, which culminates in *samadhi* during meditation, if one continues to develop it to that stage. With the use of hatha yoga, the body can become more subtle, or what is called a yoga body.

The purpose of yoga is to suspend the flickering nature and internal dictations of the mind. Being free of the dictates and influence of the mind would allow one at least a glimpse into the spiritual reality that was discussed in the Sankhya system. Yoga is also to attain relief from the pain that exists from such things as ignorance, which brings attachment, which then leads the way to fear and hatred, as well as the fear of death. The practice of yoga and renunciation is for bringing freedom from such pains and suffering, and allowing us to enter our natural state of never-ending happiness and bliss, which is the normal condition of the soul, our real identity. Although the basis of the yoga system may be quite popular, few people can actually reach the higher levels of self-realization through this process in this day and age.

The Sanskrit root of the word *yoga* is *yuj*, which means to bind, link, or unite with the object of our meditation. Thus, it is to unite the mind, intellect, the will, body, and soul to God, or the *jivatma* to the *Paramatma*, the individual soul to the Supersoul, through the discipline of yoga. Furthermore, the word *religion* comes from the Latin word *religio*, which also means to bring back or bind to God. Thus, there is no difference between the goal of yoga and the deeper goal of religion.

Religion as we know it today, however, often deals with externals, such as how we act, what we do, and customs and rituals. Spirituality, on the other hand, may also use rituals and practices, but is focused on our internal changes and

development, and is, thus, more personal and individualistic. It does not depend on a church or our connection with an institution, though that may help and is recommended in particular situations. Neither does it depend on a strict dogma, but it goes beyond all that. This is the Vedic system. The goal of religion may be to reach heaven, but the goal of Vedic spirituality, from which originates the yoga system, is *moksha*, or liberation from all forms of materialistic limitations, a reawakening of our real spiritual identity, and even entrance into the spiritual dimension.

The purpose of any true spiritual path is to raise our consciousness to the point of allowing us to directly perceive the spiritual strata. Being spiritual means to recognize one's spiritual identity and practically see the transcendental essence of all others. It also means to see that we are all parts and parcels of God and to respect each other in that light. That is one of the higher goals of yoga.

To proceed in this way, we need to understand that all things that are spiritual function on a higher plane of existence, one that is hardly perceptible by our mind, intelligence, or senses. The spiritual dimension can only be detected when our consciousness reaches a higher level of awareness, beyond the influence of the mind and senses. It is similar to radio and television waves. These are not perceptible by our mind or senses. They remain invisible, yet they are all around us. In our base level of awareness, or unawareness, we may think that such things as radio waves and television frequencies are not real. Of course, we may be viewed as quite uneducated by those who are familiar with their existence. So the thing is, even if you cannot perceive them, if you have a receiver that can detect or even utilize such subtle waves or frequencies, then you will know that radio and television waves are not only a fact, but can be used for many practical purposes.

The same thing goes for yoga, or a genuine spiritual path. It is meant to bring our consciousness up to a higher level of awareness, to fine tune it so that we can receive or perceive the higher vibrations of the spiritual strata. As we practice such a genuine spiritual tradition, our consciousness can become refined and focused enough so we can receive the subtle frequencies and perceive the reality of the spiritual domain. Then we can have our own spiritual experiences. The point is that the more spiritual we become, the more we can perceive that which is spiritual. As we develop and grow in this way, the questions about spiritual life no longer remain a mystery to solve, but become a reality to experience. It becomes a practical part of our lives. And how to reach that level of perception is supplied in the Vedic methodologies that have been preserved and handed to us by the previous sages who have also used them for their own development and spiritual experience. And that is what the Vedic process has been giving to humanity for thousands of years.

The Vedic system is practically non-denominational. It is not for any one culture or ethnic group. It is for all of humanity and is called *Sanatana-dharma*. *Sanatana-dharma* is both a path and a state of being. It means, essentially, the eternal nature of the soul, that which always exists, and our eternal duty, which is to attain that spiritual perception. We are all spiritual beings within material bodies, so the goal and our main duty in human existence is to regain that spiritual identity. This is attained by a reawakening of our higher consciousness and the direct perception of our spiritual identity. It is through the process of yoga and the path of *Sanatana-dharma* that we can reach this higher awareness and perceive exactly who we are. This is precisely the ultimate purpose of yoga.

Nowadays people often practice yoga merely for improving their physical fitness, or for their mental and overall well-being. There is nothing wrong with that, and yoga can do that most efficiently. But there is also a higher aspect of yoga, which for some has been forgotten. The great *rishis* of old in India gave it for our preparation to reach higher states of consciousness. And such training was performed for years to attain more developed states of being. Thus, the process of hatha yoga was given to prepare one for entering the elevated stages of meditation. Hatha yoga is a beginning process for preparing the body and mind for spiritual awakening through the practice of raja or astanga yoga. Thus, it is also quite effective in reducing any diseases, physical defects, or mental disturbances. And this is why some people use it as a preventative medical therapy. It is the imbalance in the energy system that contributes much of the psychic or mental diseases that people suffer. Hatha yoga, along with breathing exercises, *pranayama*, can eliminate many such problems. However, it is not enough to use only particular *asanas* or yoga postures to remedy certain problems. It must be used holistically to treat the whole person so the student, or the *sadhaka*, can rise to a higher level of being. The person's character, thought processes, mind, senses, and physical nature, must all rise to a more refined level of existence. That is what is needed, otherwise the goal of yoga remains incomplete. This, it seems, is what has been forgotten by many modern yoga teachers.

In order for the mind to be purified, the body also has to be purified, or prepared spiritually. Hatha yoga is that preliminary process by which we prepare the body, nervous system, mind, lungs or breathing, and *nadi* channels so the energy within can flow most efficiently for states of deep meditation. This is the objective of hatha yoga.

The benefits of yoga are various and numerous. On the mental level it strengthens concentration, determination, and builds a stronger character that can more easily sustain various tensions in the materialistic world. The assortment of *asanas* or postures also provide stronger health and keeps ills such as diabetes, high and low blood pressure, etc., away or in check. It improves physical strength, endurance, flexibility, back pain, digestive disorders, and arthritis. It promotes detoxification of the body, toning of muscles, and relief

from stress and anxiety. Certain diseases can be prevented or improved by performing yoga on a daily basis.

Students also use yoga to find relief from the stress of study, tests, homework, and pressure to keep up good grades. Yoga has been shown to provide an increase of energy, so students can use that toward school work and improve their academic performance.

With the practice of *pranayama* and *asanas*, the glands and muscles also increase in capability, which helps cure or prevent various diseases caused by bad food habits and irregular lifestyle. Problems such as constipation, cardiovascular and respiratory difficulties are examples of this. Yoga also strengthens the heart and keeps the veins healthy. It improves the entire digestion process, making every part of the body healthy, light, and active. Yogic exercises also work to dissolve fat, which makes the body light, healthy, fit, and attractive.

It is understood that physical growth or the anabolic process continues to the age of 18. From 18 to 35 there is a balance or neutral stage between the anabolic and catabolic or degenerative processes. But from 35 onward the catabolic or deteriorating process sets in. Yoga and meditation can significantly reduce that decline caused by the catabolic process. That is because our body's cells, organs, and nerves are affected by the attitude or energy we send through the body. They have their own consciousness and are influenced by the collective consciousness we create, that we live in by our thoughts, desires, words, and deeds. Thus, positive thoughts and spiritual practices bring uplifting results to the body. Since yoga and meditation can help establish a prolonged state of mind and body that is positive and progressive, it naturally helps rejuvenate the body and sustains life and good health, besides leads us to spiritual consciousness.

In the changes that the body undergoes through a serious practice of hatha yoga, the body can become more subtle, flexible, and balanced so that the affects of old age are greatly reduced. However, those who practice yoga seriously and not merely for outer beautification and health reasons can progress to the higher forms of yoga. They can develop or feel the superior indwelling pleasure and peace that is attainable through the full progression of yoga, which leads to self-realization, the real goal of yoga. Nonetheless, a person will still feel benefits from whatever practice they make. Even on an elementary level, a higher state of peace, tranquility, and even meditation can be attained.

Even if yoga is performed only for good health, the higher brain centers are still activated to varying degrees and can become further opened with steady practice in preparation for higher consciousness.

As one progresses through hatha yoga and engages in meditation, a person can taste a mental calm that is experienced when the mind becomes stable and steady, and more closely connected with our real spiritual identity. Thus, a person becomes attracted to the meditation sessions, and other outer or sensual forms of pleasure or happiness become less significant. As one's self-fulfillment increases, it becomes easier to naturally avoid those activities that are not conducive to peaceful living and healthy well-being.

In the preliminary stages, yoga is, essentially, for controlling the flickering nature of the mind, and for developing one's finer qualities and expanding one's consciousness from material to spiritual awareness. It is explained that yoga is the process of completely calming the movements of the mind, which include perceived knowledge, misconception, imagination, sleep, and memory. When these are stabilized, then it can be called yoga, which offers the opportunity for the seer to become established in his own essential and fundamental nature, full of bliss and light. Further than this, yoga is the attempt and the process to realign our selves with the Supreme Self, God.

When you progress in yoga in this way, you can feel the unwanted burdens of the mind fall away, such as anxiety, anger, greed, envy, hate, discontent, etc. Then other qualities like peacefulness, tranquility, contentment, and blissfulness will be felt. These are the natural qualities of the soul which everyone is trying to find and are some of the many things that can be accomplished with yoga.

As we continue to develop in yoga, we separate ourselves from the general vibrations of selfishness, greed, and anger that often pervade this planet. But we also contribute to the uplifting vibrations in the social or mass consciousness that this world so much needs these days. If we all can continue to work in this way, there could be a major shift in planetary consciousness for the upliftment of humanity for the greater good. Thus, our own spiritual progress becomes a positive influence on the whole planet.

As you make further progress, you may enter into the deeper levels of understanding and transcending the mind and gradually go so far as to attain realizations as to what your own spiritual identity is and what your relationship is with the Absolute. Becoming free from material life and regaining one's spiritual identity is the superior goal of all yoga.