

The Essence of Yoga Series – What is Hatha Yoga?



Prior to everything, asana is spoken of as the first part of hatha yoga. Having done asana, one attains steadiness of body and mind, freedom from disease and lightness of the limbs.

Hatha Yoga Pradipika (1:17)

Asana means a state of being in which one can remain physically and mentally steady, calm, quiet and comfortable. In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali there is a concise definition of yogasanas: “Sthiram Sukham assanam”, meaning that position which is comfortable and steady. So, we can see that yogasanas in this context are practiced to develop the practitioner’s ability to sit comfortably in one position for an extended length of time, as is necessary during meditation.

In raja yoga, asana refers to the sitting position, but in hatha yoga it means something more. Asanas are specific body positions which open the energy channels and psychic centres. They are tools to higher awareness and provide the stable foundation for our exploration of the body, breath, mind and beyond. The hatha yogis also found that by developing control of the body through asana, the mind is also controlled. Therefore, the practice of asana is foremost in hatha yoga.

Many modern schools of Hatha Yoga derive from the school of **Krishnamacharya**, who taught from 1924 until his death in 1989. Among his students prominent in popularizing Yoga in the West were **Pattabhi Jois**, for popularizing the vigorous Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga style, **B.K.S. Iyengar** who emphasizes alignment and the use of props, Indra Devi and **Krishnamacharya's** son **Desikachar** who developed the **Viniyoga** style.

Another major stream of influence was **Swami Sivananda** of Rishikesh (1887-1963) and his many disciples, including **Swami Vishnu-Devananda** - founder of International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres, **Swami Satyananda** - of the Bihar School of Yoga, and **Swami Satchidananda** - of Integral Yoga, among others.