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The Hatha Yoga Pradipika

The Original Sanskrit
Svatmarama

An English Translation
Brian Dana Akers
The
Hatha Yoga Pradipika
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First edition

Manufactured in the United States of America

Printed on acid-free paper

Publisher’s Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Svatmarama, Swami.

The Hatha yoga Pradipika / the original Sanskrit [by] Svatmarama ; an English translation [by] Brian Dana Akers.


xii, [116] p. : ill. ; 23 cm.
Includes Sanskrit and English.

ISBN 0-9716466-0-0 (hardcover)
ISBN 0-9716466-1-9 (paperback)

BL1238.56.H38 2002

294.5’436—dc21 2002100228

And would any of this have happened without Loretta?
For Owen & Virginia
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asanas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pranayama</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudras</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samadhi</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributors</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Over the last half millennium, one book has established itself as the classic work on Hatha Yoga—the book you are holding in your hands. An Indian yogi named Svatmarama wrote the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* in the fifteenth century C.E. Next to nothing is known about him, although his name may provide a clue. It means “one who delights in one’s Atman,” indicating the achievement of a state of bliss. Drawing on his own experience and older works now lost, he wrote this book for the student of Yoga. He wrote this book for you.

You’ve no doubt heard of Hatha Yoga. The word pradipika comes from the Sanskrit verb प्र + दीप “to flame forth” and means a light, lamp, or lantern. Its extended meaning, since one is throwing light on a subject, is an explanation or commentary. Therefore, the title means “An Explanation of Hatha Yoga.”

Even though I’ve worked hard to make it understandable, this book, like Yoga itself, will require some effort from you. It is chock-full of metaphors, synonyms, and analogies. (Perhaps it also contains a bit of hyperbole.) It is not a smooth, modern narrative, but rather an esoteric work, purposely oblique at times, from medieval India. Furthermore, I recommend that you learn Hatha Yoga under the guidance of an experienced teacher, not solely from this book. Some practices in this book I don’t recommend at all.
(You’ll know them when you read them.) This is nothing new. Looking at verses 2.37 and 3.22, you can see there have long been different opinions on what should and shouldn’t be practiced.

This book is divided into four chapters. In chapter 1, Svatmarama salutes his teachers, says why he is writing this book, who he is writing it for, where and how Yoga should be practiced, describes fifteen asanas, and recommends dietary habits. In chapter 2, he establishes the connections between breath, mind, life, nadis, and prana, then describes the six karmans and the eight kumbhakas. In chapter 3, Svatmarama says what mudras are for, then describes the ten mudras. In chapter 4, he discusses samadhi, laya, nada, two mudras, and the four stages of Yoga.

The Sanskrit original is complete and correct. I carefully examined four previous editions of the text word by word—in fact, letter by letter—to produce the best, most aesthetically pleasing version of the original Sanskrit ever published. I favored more sandhi over less, and took the liberty of simplifying and standardizing the sentence that concludes each chapter. Lines and verses were grouped the way they were translated, but the numbering was left unchanged. I utilized Arabic numerals and left the translation unnumbered to avoid clutter. While including the Sanskrit for the benefit of scholars, students, and posterity, its inclusion—allowing easy comparison with the English—is also a statement of confidence in the quality of the translation.

The English translation is both accurate and accessible. To make it accurate, I stayed in the background and put myself at the service of the author and the text. I suppressed any urges to coin neologisms and employ fleeting usage, or to add my own comments and interpretations. The verse was made the unit of translation to stay off the slippery slope of paraphrase. Where the meaning is open to interpretation, I followed the tradition, specifically Brahmananda’s Jyotsna commentary. Due to the ever-increasing
knowledge of the reading public, more words were left untranslated than would have been a quarter century ago. (You may want a dictionary of Yoga handy.) Some previous translators inexplicably suffocated the book’s wonderful parallel constructions; I allowed them to breathe. The translation is gender neutral where appropriate, but many words in the original are gender—even anatomically—specific, and were left that way. Finally, almost every word in the original made it into the translation. Few were left out, and very few new words were added.

I did many things to make the translation accessible. I tried to use international standard written English and produce prose that is clear, concise, and direct. To that end, I often broke a long Sanskrit sentence into shorter English ones, typically changed the word order from subject-object-verb to subject-verb-object, favored the active voice over the passive, added the necessary punctuation, and occasionally moved the latter part of a line or verse to the beginning for a better flow. Diacritics, italics, and the heavy use of brackets were dispensed with to avoid the hyperdensity common in books on Indian philosophy. The transliteration system, therefore, is not perfect—both र and द are represented by “sh,” for example, and च is represented by “ch.” (However, I retained the familiar Sri instead of going with Shri, and went with yogi instead of the more correct yogin.) I invite the stickler for spelling and pronunciation to learn Devanagari—it’s a delightful writing system. Compounds are generally open to avoid long strings of unfamiliar letter combinations, although when compounded, the words bandha, mudra, kumbhaka, and karman are the final members of a closed compound for consistency within each category and with the asanas. I decided notes placed at the foot of the page—rather than at the end of the chapter, the end of the book, or in brackets within the translation—would be the least distracting and most convenient way for you to receive necessary bits of information. Lastly, I regularly changed the third person potential mood found in many descriptions to a
simple imperative. For example, in verse 1.20, “One should put the right ankle” becomes simply “Put the right ankle.”

Knowing a few more things will make this book easier to follow. In Svatmarama’s use of language, time equals death, nadis are rivers or streams, chakras are lotuses, sun and moon each refer to multiple things, and the fluid said to drip from a cavity in the skull is variously called soma, nectar, essence, juice, liquor, or crescent water. Kumbhaka means pranayama in general (verse 3.126), breath retention in particular (verse 2.71), and eight specific practices (verse 2.44). Objects means “objects of the senses,” and “without objects” more literally means “independent” or “without support.” Practices are almost always described before they are named. For example, Simhasana is described in verses 1.50 and 1.51, but not named until verse 1.52. Practices have also changed over the centuries, as have the names attached to them. Indeed, verse 1.37 gives four different names for one asana. In our photographs, we gave primacy to the (often terse and incomplete) descriptions in the book, then filled in the details according to current understanding of the asanas. Appreciation is extended to J. Prabhakara Sastry, who supervised my first attempt at translation in 1979, and to Ashok Aklujkar, who made many last-minute improvements to this effort. Neither is responsible for any remaining shortcomings.

Even keeping all of the above in mind, the meaning of some verses may remain opaque. Rest assured that the translation is complete, clear, and correct. This is an esoteric work from medieval India which describes mystical entities, practices, and states of consciousness. To come to a full realization of Yoga, you will need to study other books, learn from a teacher, and above all, practice.

Finally, you may be wondering if the things described in this book are “really true.” I invite the scientifically minded to do some empirical research. In a peaceful country, in a quiet place, free of all anxieties...
Chapter One

Asanas

Salutations to Shiva, who taught the science of Hatha Yoga. It is the aspirant’s stairway to the heights of Raja Yoga.

Yogi Svatmarama, after saluting the Lord and guru, explains the science of Hatha for one reason—Raja Yoga.

For those ignorant of Raja Yoga, wandering in the darkness of too many opinions, compassionate Svatmarama gives the light of Hatha.
Matsyendra, Goraksha, and others know well the science of Hatha. By their grace, Yogi Svatmarama also knows it.

Shiva, Matsyendra, Shabara, Anandabhairava, Chaurangi, Mina, Goraksha, Virupaksha, Bileshaya, Manthana, Bhairava, Siddhi, Buddha, Kanthadi, Korantaka, Surananda, Siddhapada, Charpati, Kaneri, Pu Jayapada, Nityanatha, Niranjana, Kapali, Bindunatha, Kakachandishvara, Allama Prabhudeva, Ghodacholi, Tintini, Bhanuki, Naradeva, Khanda, and Kapalika—these and other great masters, having conquered death through the power of Hatha Yoga, roam the universe.
स्वस्तिकासन – Svastikasana
Hatha is the sanctuary for those suffering every type of pain. It is the foundation for those practicing every type of Yoga.

The science of Hatha should be kept top secret by the yogi desirous of success. It is potent when concealed and impotent when revealed.

The Hatha yogi should live in a secluded hut free of stones, fire, and dampness to a distance of four cubits in a country that is properly governed, virtuous, prosperous, and peaceful.

अशेषयोगयुतानामाधारकमठे हठः ॥ 10

हठविर्गः परं गोष्प्या योगिना सिद्धिमिच्छन्ता ।
भवेद्वैर्यवती गुप्ता निर्वीर्याः तु प्रकाशिता ॥ 11

The Hatha yogi should live in a secluded hut free of stones, fire, and dampness to a distance of four cubits in a country that is properly governed, virtuous, prosperous, and peaceful.

सुराज्ये धार्मिके देशे सुभिक्षे निरुपद्रवे ।
धनुःप्रमाणपर्यः शिलाग्रिजलविजिते ।
एकान्ते पठिकामध्ये स्थातव्यं हठयोगिना ॥ 12

The Hatha yogi should live in a secluded hut free of stones, fire, and dampness to a distance of four cubits in a country that is properly governed, virtuous, prosperous, and peaceful.

अल्पपद्वारमङ्गङ्गतिकवरं नात्युक्तनीचायतं
सम्मयंगोमयसन्त्रिलिखितमद्भवं निषोषजन्तृज्ञितम् ।
वाहो मण्डपवैकपमचिरं प्राकारसंवेष्टितं
प्रोक्तं योगमठस्य लक्षणामिदं सिद्धेन्टाध्यायासिभः ॥ 13
गोमुखासन – Gomukhasana
These are the marks of a Yoga hut as described by masters practicing Hatha: a small door, no windows, no rat holes; not too high, too low, or too long; well plastered with cow dung, clean, and bug free. The grounds are enclosed by a wall and beautified by an arbor, a raised platform, and a well.

Living in this hut, free of all anxieties, one should earnestly practice Yoga as taught by one’s guru.

Yoga perishes by these six: overeating, overexertion, talking too much, performing needless austerities, socializing, and restlessness.

Yoga succeeds by these six: enthusiasm, openness, courage, knowledge of the truth, determination, and solitude.
Virasana – Virasana
Asanas are described first because they are the first step of Hatha. They give steadiness, health, and lightness of body.

I will describe some asanas endorsed by Vasishtha and other sages, and by Matsyendra and other yogis.

Correctly place both soles of the feet inside the thighs and knees. Sit up straight. This is Svastikasana.

Put the right ankle on its left side beside the buttock. Likewise, put the left ankle on its right side. This is called Gomukhasana because it resembles a cow’s face.

Similarly, place one foot on top of one thigh, and the other thigh on top of the other foot. This is Virasana.
Cover the anus with crossed ankles and sit motionless. Knowers of Yoga know that this is Kurmasana.¹

Settle in Padmasana. Put the hands between the knees and thighs. Place the hands on the earth. Lift into the sky. This is Kukkutasana.

Assume Kukkutasana, join the neck with the hands, and lie on the back like a turtle. This is Uttanakurmasana.

Bring the big toes as far as the ears with both hands as if drawing a bow. This is Dhanurasana.

¹The asana nowadays called Kurmasana no longer corresponds to this description. We have photographed the modern version.
कुकुटासन – Kukkutasana
Place the right foot at the root of the left thigh, and the left foot outside the right knee. Grasp the feet and twist the body. This is the asana taught by Sri Matsyanatha.

This Matsyendrasana stimulates the appetite. It is a weapon which destroys a multitude of deadly diseases. Regular practice awakens the kundalini and firms the moon in men.

Stretch both legs on the ground like sticks. Grasp the toes with both hands. Rest the forehead on the knees. This is Paschimatanasana.

This Paschimatana is foremost among asanas. It reverses the breath’s flow, kindles the fire of the stomach, flattens the belly, and brings good health to men.

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2 Discussion of this meaning of the word moon begins with verse 3.49.
उत्तानकूर्मासन – Uttanakurmasana
Hold the earth with both hands. Place the sides of the navel on the elbows. Rise high above the ground like a stick. This is Mayurasana.

The Sri Mayurasana overcomes defects and quickly destroys all diseases—enlargement of the spleen, enlargement of the abdomen, and so on. It stimulates the stomach’s fire, incinerates all bad food, and makes the deadly Kalakuta poison digestible.

Lying on the back on the ground like a corpse is Shavasana. It removes fatigue and gives rest to the mind.
Dhanurasana
Eighty-four asanas were taught by Shiva. Of those I shall describe the essential four.

Siddha, Padma, Simha, and Bhadra—these four are the best. And of these, Siddhasana is always comfortable to maintain.

Press the perineum with the heel of the foot. Place the other foot above the penis. Hold the chin steady on the heart. Remain motionless. Restrain the senses. Look with a steady gaze between the eyebrows. This is Siddhasana. It opens the doors of liberation.

Place the left ankle above the penis. Put the other ankle above the left foot. Some say this is Siddhasana.
स्येन्द्रासन – Matsyendrasana
Some call this Siddhasana. Others know it as Vajrasana. Some say it is Muktasana. Others call it Guptasana.

The masters know that Siddhasana is the best of all asanas, just as moderate diet is the foremost yama and nonviolence is the fundamental niyama.

Of the eighty-four asanas, always practice Siddhasana. It removes impurities from the seventy-two thousand nadis.

You have just read the first 10% of the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. Go to YogaVidya.com to learn more.

Feel free to share this with your friends and colleagues.
Contributors

BRIAN DANA AKERS began practicing Hatha Yoga at age twelve, learning Sanskrit at seventeen, and working in publishing at twenty-three. You can find out more about him at BrianDanaAkers.com.

JILL ALEA BUTSON, the woman in the photographs, loves sharing Yoga with other people. She also works full-time caring for ill, injured, and orphaned wildlife. MICHAEL L. RIXSON has been a professional photographer since 1983 and a practitioner of Yoga since 1997.

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From the Introduction

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“Accurate and accompanied by clear pictures, this translation of an informative Sanskrit text is a very useful addition to the growing literature on Yoga in Western languages.”
—Ashok Aklujkar, University of British Columbia, Author of Sanskrit: An Easy Introduction to an Enchanting Language