



The Tiny Hatha Yoga Philosophy
by Shannon Frances

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Yogas citta vritti nirodha.

– Patanjali

Yoga eliminates the distortions of the mind.

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Introduction

This book is intended for yoga students and teachers who would like a short, general introduction to the philosophy of hatha yoga.

The inspiration for this book came from one of my teachers, who began her yoga classes by reading a short passage from various books. Her selection stimulated my curiosity, induced a voracious appetite for yoga books and led to an enduring quest to answer the question “What is yoga?”

Not every serious student of yoga will have the time or inclination to read Georg Feuerstein’s *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice* or any of the other hefty tomes dedicated to yoga philosophy. This tiny philosophy was written to provide a brief and general introduction of contemporary hatha yoga to supplement and enhance the experiences that yoga students have in their classes and home practice. It is primarily for beginning students, advanced students who do not have time to read a lot of yoga books and yoga teachers who want accessible answers to their student’s questions. It is not a guide to practice and it is not intended to replace instruction from a qualified yoga teacher.

This book comes from my own yoga experiences and passion for reading about yoga. Because the first decades of my practice were interrupted by frequent moves, inconsistent access to yoga instruction, fluctuations in free time and changing class schedules, as well as physical limitations and health issues, I feel I have been a beginner for over twenty years. During this time I was exposed to the styles of many different teachers and listened to questions from many different students. These experiences, I feel, have given me a sensitivity to the issues and questions faced by people who are starting out and trying to establish their own yoga practice. While writing, I tried to recall the questions that I asked and was asked by beginning yoga students and have tried to provide accurate, unbiased, concise and relevant answers to the most common questions. At the end of each topic, additional questions are given to spark further interest and self-reflection on the experience of yoga. I have organized the questions to

reflect the natural flow of inquiry, not like a text book, allowing the reflection of each question to build on the previous.

The practice of yoga is fantastically, enormously, mind bogglingly diverse and I have attempted to honor this diversity within the limits of a book that can be conveniently carried in a yoga-mat bag. The limitations of my own experiences naturally define the limitations of what I can write about yoga. I have no choice but to emphasize the kinds of yoga I have personally experienced and to try to capture this experience in words, which are poor tools for describing something as vast, deep and experiential as yoga. However, I will try to give you enough information to support and encourage your exploration of yoga. With this book, I hope to give back to a tradition that has given me so much.

I would appreciate any corrections and other feedback you might have regarding this book; please contact me at tiny_yoga@gardenbenchpublishing.com.

Namaste!

Shannon Frances
Nibong Tebal, Malaysia, January 2014

What is yoga?

Yoga is a complicated and vast collection of philosophies, spiritual beliefs, physical practices, lifestyle choices, religious rituals, art forms and documents that originated in the Indian subcontinent. Some of these practices have been communicated to and modified in other countries, and are now being practiced in various forms all over the world.

The goal of yoga has been described as “union with the absolute.” However, what the absolute actually is, and guidance for how to achieve union with him, her or it, varies greatly throughout time, culture and the various yoga schools.

It is generally claimed that yoga has been practiced in India for over 4000 years. Many of the terms used in yoga are from the ancient Indian language Sanskrit. As with any practice that endures for so long, yoga has adapted and evolved as the cultural and social environments in which it existed changed. As yoga passed the borders of cultures and languages, it was modified for different groups of practitioners. The practice of yoga has experienced schism, divergence, evolution, reformation and redefinition repeatedly through its extensive history.

What we know of ancient yoga practices bears little resemblance to how yoga is currently practiced. However, the teachings of yoga retain a thread of continuity through the ages and, generally, provide methods for attaining higher states of physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The following are common aspects of yoga practices throughout time:

- Training for moral, spiritual and supernatural development
- Physical exercise and dietary guidelines for health and fitness
- Breathing exercises, chanting and sound for controlling mental states
- Meditation
- Self-observation, self-understanding and self-discipline

- Pursuit of knowledge through study of scriptures and other literature
- Cultivation of beneficial emotional states, such as compassion or devotion
- Use of rituals to enhance any of the above

The details and philosophy of yoga methods, however, are astonishingly diverse. A few centuries ago, yoga was only practiced by males of an elite class within exclusive, secret communities. Yoga has become more egalitarian and accessible — now everyone can practice yoga. For much of its history, hatha yoga practice included physical exercise only as a method to calm the mind and increase physical and mental stamina for more strenuous endeavors. Currently in the West, hatha yoga is practiced primarily for physical fitness, and most teachers do not address esoteric topics in their classes. Yoga, from its historical roots to the enormous diversity of current practices, seems to refuse limitation and defy any definition.

Which of the listed aspects of yoga have you experienced? Which have been useful to you? Which are you interested in pursuing further? Do you consider them all valid aspects of yoga?

Yoga can be considered a way to access and expand normal capacities that are underused. Where do you need to develop? Are your personal goals for your yoga practice more related to physical, mental or spiritual transformation? How does your practice address these issues? How has your practice already been helpful to you? How open are you to other aspects of yoga that may be new to you?

Yoga offers a whole-body philosophy, which differs from many kinds of Western philosophy, which are predominately concerned with thoughts and matters of the intellect (consider René Descartes' statement, "I think therefore I am"). How integrated is your approach?

Have you ever met a yoga practitioner that you really admire? Do you believe that their yoga practice contributed to the attainment of their admirable characteristics?

What does “yoga” mean?

The Sanskrit word “yoga” has the same root as the English word “yoke” and is usually translated as “union.” However, the subject of union is vastly diverse in its description within the yoga tradition. Below is a selection of descriptions of the aspects being joined in yogic union:

- Awareness and action
- Ego and love
- Emotional and rational
- Female (Shakti) and male (Shiva)
- Individual consciousness and absolute consciousness
- Individual person and God
- Inner and outer
- Intention and action
- Knowledge and truth
- Material and energetic
- Mind and body
- Movement and breath
- Nature (prakriti) and spirit (purusha)
- Observer and the observed
- Parts and the whole
- Passive and dynamic
- Practitioner and his or her true nature
- Time and space

The different practices of yoga, according to a conventional analogy, are like the different paths to the top of a mountain: each path takes the traveler through different terrain and landscape, but the ultimate goal — attaining the summit (yogic

union) — is the same. Multiple paths are available to accommodate students of different temperament and ability. Yoga is an experiential practice and, thus, difficult to capture comprehensively in words. Perhaps all descriptions of yogic union are incomplete and yet mean the same thing.

Which of the descriptions of yogic union above appeal to you? How do they relate to your goals for practicing yoga? How do you define yoga?

What do you desire to yoke yourself to? With what would you like to become unified? Does this desire have anything to do with your yoga practice?

Yoga offers a diversity of emphases and techniques that can be practiced as a way to get fit, to promote health or to facilitate personal development. Yoga can be part of a wholesome and conscious lifestyle, a spiritual discipline and even a competitive sport. Do you believe that all individuals pursuing the many various types of yoga will naturally approach the same state?

Consider your own goal. Do you believe there are multiple paths to attainment? Are different paths appropriate for different people? Do you have a choice of paths, allowing you to select the most appropriate one?

Swami Vivekananda, an Indian philosopher who was instrumental in bringing yoga to the West, may be the first person to have suggested that all Hindu sects and, in fact, all religions, are different paths to the same goal. Within Hinduism, this idea has been criticized as an oversimplification. Some followers of other religions object, believing that their religion is the one true religion. Do you believe that there is a single goal to all human endeavors? If such a goal exists, how would you describe it?

Try to describe your experience of yoga so far. Is it easy for you to describe these experiences in words? Do your experiences match any of the descriptions listed above?

What kinds of yoga are there?

There are innumerable yogic paths and the teachings of different paths may be very similar or contradict each other. A few of the most popular kinds of yoga are listed here:

- **Raja** — contemplation; emphasis on meditation (includes hatha yoga)
- **Karma** — action; ego-transcending behavior (performing selfless service without expecting praise or respect)
- **Mantra** — recitation; use of sacred sounds, words or phrases to transcend normal states of consciousness
- **Bhakti** — emotion; selfless love and devotion to God or teacher
- **Jnana** — knowledge; the search for wisdom and insight through discerning study and reflection

There are no clear-cut distinctions between the branches of yoga described here. Any distinguishing practice of one type of yoga may be practiced in a similar way or with a different emphasis or techniques in other types of yoga. For example, tantric yoga is sometimes listed as a separate branch of yoga. Tantric practices are applied with the purpose of sublimating reality (e.g., unite the ordinary with the divine) and include specific use of postures, breathing exercises, gestures, chants, symbolic images, visualization and ritual. Tantric practices can be used with any kind of yoga (or other endeavor, such as martial arts) and most contemporary forms of hatha yoga include tantric practices. The distinction between tantric yoga and other kinds of yoga is largely one of emphasis, although there is enough overlap to be confusing.

It may be helpful to think of yoga as being a tree with different branches (e.g., the types of yoga listed above), twigs (e.g., different schools within one branch) and leaves (individual aspects of practice). Any aspect of yoga can be emphasized as a branch, twig or leaf. For example, kundalini yoga can be considered a branch (where practices are organized around the

