

Frequently Asked Questions About Hatha-Yoga

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

1. Is Hatha-Yoga the only kind of Yoga there is?

Far from it. The Yoga tradition comprises many distinct approaches, notably Râja-Yoga (the "royal" path of meditation), Jnâna-Yoga (the path of discernment and wisdom), Karma-Yoga (the path of self-transcending action), Bhakti-Yoga (the path of devotion), and Tantra (the integrative path developed in the medieval era).

2. What is the difference between contemporary Hatha-Yoga and traditional Hatha-Yoga?

Traditional Hatha-Yoga is a pronouncedly **spiritual** tradition, that is, it is concerned primarily with the goal of liberation, or enlightenment. The various physical practices all serve to create a healthy, vital body that can withstand the rigors of an ascetical approach to life involving the awakening of the "serpent power" (*kundalinî-shakti*). The contemporary schools of Western Hatha-Yoga, by contrast, are *mostly* geared toward physical fitness, strength or flexibility.. They tend to ignore traditional Yoga's spiritual orientation nor its ethical foundations. The distinct feature of traditional Hatha-Yoga is its attempt to create a transubstantiated immortal body of energy through the mastery over the five material elements.

3. How old is traditional Hatha-Yoga?

Probably, yogins and yoginis discovered the health benefits of certain yogic practices (notably breath control) early on, though their focus was always on the spiritual benefit gained from consistently engaging those practices. It was not, however, until around 1000 A.D. that, under the body-positive tradition of Tantra, practitioners of Yoga formulated the tenets of Hatha-Yoga and also developed the postures and breathing techniques into psychosomatic devices for self-transformation. Previously, postures (*âsana*) were used exclusively for the purpose of stabilizing the body during meditation, and breath control (*prânâyâma*) was used in order to deepen the meditative process.

4. Who invented traditional Hatha-Yoga?

Traditional authorities associate Hatha-Yoga with Goraksha Nâtha, whose teacher is said to have been Matsyendra, even though the latter appears to have lived many centuries earlier. Goraksha, the founder of the Kânphata ("Split-Ear") sect, lived in the 10th to 11th century. The texts attributed to him do not show the elaborate postural technology of subsequent schools of Hatha-Yoga. Rather, he focused on breath control as a major transformative tool.

5. Can contemporary Hatha-Yoga be considered authentic?

This is a difficult question to answer. It all depends on the school or style. To the degree that a school or style honors and preserves Yoga's general spiritual and ethical orientation, it is likely to be authentic. In its best manifestations, contemporary Hatha-Yoga can be viewed as a modern adaptation of traditional Hatha-Yoga. But then there are also schools and approaches that have very little in common with traditional Hatha-Yoga. *Caveat emptor!*

6. Is contemporary (Western) Hatha-Yoga as potent as traditional Hatha-Yoga?

The answer to this question again depends on which school or style one is talking about. But contemporary Western Hatha-Yoga does not (yet) appear to have given rise to great adepts like Matsyendra or Goraksha, which does not mean that this could not happen in the future.

7. Is it useful to practice contemporary Hatha-Yoga?

Of course. Just be very clear on what sort of Hatha-Yoga you are practicing and what its inherent limitations are. If you are looking for health, fitness, or strength, the contemporary styles of Hatha-Yoga will not disappoint. If you are looking for spiritual fulfillment, you must look more closely at a system and its teacher(s).

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