

TRADITIONAL HATHA YOGA (THY) vs. NEO-HATHA YOGA (NHY)

The only thing I am doing is to bring out the in-depth, hidden qualities of Yoga ... What I do is pure, authentic traditional Yoga. It is wrong to differentiate traditional Yoga as Iyengar Yoga ...

The Yoga I teach, is purely Astanga Yoga, known as the eight limbs of Yoga, expounded by Patanjali in his 196 terse Sutras ... supplemented with Hatha-yoga texts, the Gita and others. The Sutras ... have attracted considerable attention and there are many commentaries on it. Most commentators have seen the subject of Yoga objectively or from the academic angle. On the other hand, I have responded to it subjectively, comparing my feelings and experiences with the original text through uninterrupted practices and refinements.

70 Glorious Years of Yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar, xxvii, xxviii

1. **TWICE-BORN MALES:** Unlike today, when most practitioners are female, THY was restricted entirely to twice-born males.

2. **INITIATION:** There were no books to buy and read, or public classes to attend, the only way to learn the practice was to be initiated by an experienced teacher, which was apparently very hard to achieve. The initiation is a re-enactment of the original teaching, in which the deity passes on the knowledge to the first human teacher. We have some examples of the enormous efforts some hopeful practitioners went through to win a guru's attention and trust:

Take Brihadratha for example (whose story is told in the Maitri Upanishad; brihat = lofty, mighty; ratha = warrior). He was a king who abdicated his throne and went out into the forest to find the Truth. To prove his sincerity and worthiness, he stood, gazing at the sun, arms raised, for 1000 days. At the end of this time he approached the sage Shakayanya, a "knower of the self, seeming to blaze with energy like a fire without smoke." The sage, impressed by the former king's austerities, offered him a boon. Brihadratha immediately begged to be taught about the self. Shakayanya waffled, saying such a teaching was too difficult, and asked Brihadratha to request another favor. But there was no stopping Brihadratha. He dismissed the things of the world—the body, great kings, demigods and demons, the mountains, the ocean—each time with the refrain, "What is the use of indulging in desires?" Again he begged the sage to help him, pleading, "I am like a frog in a sealed well ... You are our way out." Pleased by this, Shakayanya agreed to teach.

3. **TEACHER:** This initiation could only be carried out by a self-realized teacher. Only such an individual had the authority/personal power to energetically "charge" the initiate. The initiation "jump-started" the practice and the process of self-transformation.

The science of Hatha should be kept top secret (param gopya) by the yogi desirous of success. It is potent when concealed and impotent when revealed (HYP 1.11).

4. **SECRECY:** Because the practice was initiatory, there was also a strong emphasis on secrecy. The student was solemnly sworn to keep the teaching to himself. The word for "secret" (gupta) crops up at least 7 or 8 times in the HYP (1.11; 2.23, 32; 3.9, 18, 30; 4.17 and by implication 4.2). Why?

a. Some practices could be physically/psychologically harmful if practiced without training by /supervision of an experienced teacher. Secrecy keeps these “sharp tools” out of the hands of the uninitiated, just like you’d keep sharp objects away from children.

b. The practices are also believed to be the source of tremendous power (*siddha*). A unsupervised/unqualified student could easily become distracted by the power and misuse or abuse it (Cf. Darth Vadar).

c. Secrecy adds a special quality to the knowledge, the feeling of being in-the-know intensifies the power of the teaching, as well as accentuating the knower’s separation from “average” people. Secrecy is a constant reminder that, because of your study, you’re somehow different than those around you. Of course then it’s important to avoid “ego inflation,” the knowledge doesn’t make you “better” than everyone else, only different.

5. APPEARANCE: Yogis’ behavior/appearance was bizarre, purposely calculated to set them apart from the “straight” world; eg, nudity or near-nudity, covered with ashes, carrying a skull as a begging bowl; so the practice proceeded on the fringes of mainstream society. Note though that Svاتمarama writes success isn’t achieved by “wearing the right clothes” (1.66).

6. BEHAVIOR: The yogis didn’t associate with average people: Goraksha says to avoid “bad people” and “women” (1.61), Svاتمarama “socializing” (1.15). Consequently there’s not much interest in everyday “socially acceptable” behavior, since presumably the practitioner didn’t have much to do with the outside world. Some translations of the HYP include yama/niyama, others don’t. The rationale typically given is that these behavioral guidelines were so well known that they didn’t need to be included, it was just assumed the practitioner knew them well. This may or may not be the case. The GS for example, names 7 limbs of practice, but says nothing about behavioral guides (1.9).

7. PRACTICE: Practice dominated the life, you practiced at least three or four times a day (HYP 2.11) at the “junctions”: dawn, noon, sunset, midnight.

For example, commenting on the three “greats” (maha mudra, maha bandha, maha vedha), Svاتمarama says “they are to be done eight times every day” (HYP 3.31). Viparita karani mudra (headstand?) is ideally practiced for “three hours every day” (HYP 3.82).

Practice was tailored to suit the individual student. Each student was viewed as a unique individual with varying strengths and weaknesses, so that the structure and timing of the practice had to be adjusted to account for the student’s capacities.

GOING PUBLIC:

1. SECRECY: Someone had to be willing to let the “cat out of the bag” and go public with the secret knowledge. There was consequently a need to “child-proof,” sanitize, and simplify the teaching, eliminate the dangerous/objectionable/esoteric practices (e.g., khechari mudra, vajroli mudra, amaroli mudra, nada), since large numbers of practitioners would no longer have access to personal instruction.

Problem: SECRECY is supposed to make the practice more effective, powerful (see HYP 1.11). What happens to that power when the secret is revealed? Also, is the discipline still effective without these eliminated practices? Has it been diminished or rendered ineffective?

Question: Have all the secrets been revealed? Are there now new consciousness-altering techniques that are hidden away from the world?

Since the teaching is going public, it would be impossible to exclude certain segments of the population, so women too had to be accepted into the fold (cf. Shri Yogendra and his wife). Krishnamacharya at first resisted teaching women.

There's also the question of the teacher. In traditional yoga the teacher was a self-realized individual who'd "been there, done that." Nowadays the teacher isn't necessarily anyone more than a practitioner slightly more experienced than the student. Teachers are "certified," often in a few weeks. The goal of the traditional practice is "difficult to obtain without the compassion of the guru" (HYP 4.9). Apparently the successful outcome of the practice is a combination of self-effort and a "transfer of energy" from a powerful benefactor/guide.

Question: If the teacher lacks this energy, and most do, is the practice still efficacious?

ON BEHAVIOR: The practice had to be "tamed" and "moralized," no more running around naked, smeared with ashes, acting crazy. Whether or not traditional HY had behavioral guidelines, modern HY needed them, to make the practice appropriate for householders, make the practice seem more useful in the sense that it could be applied to the workaday world.

Iyengar assumes the five classical yamas and five classical niyamas, though traditional HY texts provide 10 yamas and 10 niyamas of their own:

YAMA in Iyengar and Hatha Yoga

SHARED: Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, Shaucha (which in Patanjali is a niyama)

MISSING: Daya (kindliness), Arjava (equanimity), Kshama (patience), Dhriti (firmness of mind), Mitahara (proper diet); Aparigraha (missing from HY)

NIYAMAS

SHARED: Tapas, Santosha, Ishvarapujana (similar to pranidhana)

MISSING: Astikya, Dana (alms), Siddhanta-Sravaṇa, Hrih (shame), Mati, Japa, Vrata

Since he claims to be teaching ashtanga Yoga, Iyengar of necessity needed to assume the classical strictures, although several of the un-shared HY yamas are commendable. One problem is that three HY niyamas are based on knowledge of the Veda, mostly inaccessible to Westerners.

Astikya = astika: "there is or exists"= belief in God, faithfulness; "belief in the merits or demerits of actions as stated in the Vedas" (shandilya)

Siddhanta-Shravana = “inquiry into the significance of Vedanta” (shandilya); “listening to the doctrines”

Mati = devotion, prayer, worship; determination; “faith in the paths laid down by the Vedas” (shandilya)

Vrata = regular observance of or the refraining from the actions enjoined or prohibited by the Vedas (shandilya); vow

ON THE POWERS:

One of the sought after consequences of the practice, the acquisition and intensification of power, had to be down-played, even denied; it would be too dangerous if people understood the old yogis were purposely cultivating magical power. Without a personal guide such power could easily be mis-used.

These powers ... are traps for the practitioner .. Patanjali explains that ... the yogi has to fight when he gets these powers, because they can become psychological afflictions. ... The newly experienced powers will be a trap for you and divert you from the true aim of yoga.

BKS Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga*, 123

In spite of abundant textual references to various siddhis in classical Yoga texts, many modern Indian scholars, and like-minded western ones as well, have seized on a single sutra of Patanjali (iii.37) to prove that magical powers were regarded as subsidiary, and even hindrances, to final liberation, and consequently not worthy of concentrated pursuit. This attitude may have been operative in Vedantic and Buddhist circles and is now popular among practitioners imbued with the spirit of the Hindu Renaissance, but it was not the view of Patanjali and certainly not the view of mediaeval exponents of Hatha Yoga. Arthur Koestler has pointed out that the sutra in question seems clearly to refer back only to the powers mentioned in previous one or two sutras and not to the many powers mentioned afterwards. He concludes that ‘all disclaimers notwithstanding, the siddhis are an integral part of Yoga’...”

David Lorenzen, *The Kapalikas and Kalamukhas*, pp. 93-94

PRACTICE: The time needed to perform the practice had to be decreased, so that it wouldn't dominate peoples' lives. Instead of four complicated practices daily we now get 10 minute “practices.” Practice also had to be standardized. Students now are instructed en masse, sometimes with 100s of other students in the room. “One size fits all” regardless of capacity.

The asanas were primarily preparations for pranayama and meditation (but see HYP Matsyendra, Siddha, Padma). Their purpose was invested with moral dimension; changed to make them more broadly functional; i.e., they became meditation in and of themselves, expressions of behavior (eg ahimsa)

Breathing practices too had to be changed; traditional PY is impossible without bandhas, which aren't taught much nowadays. PY is essentially “conscious breathing”

THE INDIAN GURU ARCHETYPE

Based on the biographies of:

Swami Rama Tirtha	Paramahansa Yogananda	Shri Yogendra
Jiddu Krishnamurti	Swami Prabhavananda	Swami Omkar
Tirumular Krishnamcharya	BKS Iyengar	K. Pattabhi Jois
Maharishi Mahesh Yogi	Swami Muktananda	Swami Sivananda
Swami Prabhupada	Swami Rama	Swami Vivekananda
Yogi Bhajan	Amrit Desai	Baba Premananda Bharati
Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh	Swami Satchidananda	

- § The future guru is always male. His economic class varies, many come from the upper-middle class (Yogananda), while others grow up in relative poverty (Krishnamurti), though most are typically born to a brahmin family.
- § He's often born at some astrologically propitious time, or in a spiritually significant place, or during a spiritually significant festival.
- § An astrologer/spiritual master predicts great things for him in the future.
- § He's often unusually smart for his age, sometimes debating with adults, sometimes he has psychic powers or visions, or displays spiritual inclinations or flashes of illumination. He also sometimes displays heart-warming compassion for the poor (and Untouchables), animals, etc.
- § He often has a traditional spiritual upbringing, sometimes taught by his father from spiritual texts (like the Rig Veda) in Sanskrit. His mother is usually deeply religious.
- § He's often an outstanding student at school, and is often educated at a Western-style school (sometimes run by Christians), though sometimes he's a poor student (Iyengar), even despite an expensive Western education (Krishnamurti). He also displays other remarkable talents or gifts (singing, acting, athletic ability, writing).
- § As a result of his superior intellectual and artistic abilities, it's widely agreed among family and friends he's destined for a successful career in the world (e.g., mathematics or philosophy professor, doctor, engineer), though sometimes he may struggle financially.
- § Sometimes a parent dies when he's young or a wife dies early on in marriage, which may precipitate a spiritual search (see below).
- § He may work at some high-paying job but is ultimately unsatisfied by material life, and his spiritual longings become overpowering.
- § There's almost always a guru (almost always male), and usually he's the guru for life. He often meets his guru in a chance encounter. He may immediately recognize and accept the guru, or go through a difficult period of doubt before committing (Vivekananda). The initiation is usually a deeply transformative experience.
- § Usually he's completely dedicated to his guru, but sometimes the relationship is rocky (Iyengar seems to be the most usual exception to these rules).
- § The guru performs "miracles" (e.g., healing the sick and lame, predicting the future, materializing objects out of thin air).
- § There's often a period of wandering in the wilderness (for months or even years), either in self-reflection (sometimes after a death in the family), sometimes while following his

- guru, or if he hasn't yet found him, sometimes in search of his true guru (especially in the Himalayas, though sometimes throughout the whole of India).
- \$ Sometimes he has progressive ideas for his time and place (e.g., favors female education, rejects caste distinctions), though he can also be a strict traditionalist.
 - \$ He often has a wealthy patron (e.g., successful businessman, royalty).
 - \$ He leaves India for the West (exception: Krishnamacharya, Sivananda) for different reasons: He's sent on a "mission" by his guru to spread Hindu "gospel" to the world; to raise money for social causes; he heeds a "call within."
 - \$ His message is often well-received in the West, and he attracts well-to-do supporters who give him money/property and he sometimes amasses a fortune himself.
 - \$ He establishes an ashram, organization, institute (usually in a large city or highly desirable locale), that grows and spreads across the country, or dies out after he leaves the country.
 - \$ Sometimes he develops an innovative practice, which he synthesizes from various existing practices, though often he tries to associate his invention with traditional teachings.
 - \$ If he returns to India, he's often welcomed as a hero.
 - \$ He often undergoes a miraculous death (though he's not usually described as "dying" but entering "maha samadhi" or "leaving his body" as if intentional), or sometimes something miraculous happens after his death (e.g., his body doesn't decay).