

Hatha Yoga: “Luke – Use the Force”

Students often ask me what style of yoga I teach. Is it Iyengar yoga? Power yoga? Ashtanga, Jivamukti, Moksha, Svaroopa, Bikram, Anusara, Kundalini, Sivananda? No, No, No and No. I do not teach any branded style of yoga. The list above represents not styles of yoga, but brands of yoga. Every one of those brands is actually practicing the same style of yoga. It is all hatha yoga.

Branding makes it possible to differentiate a product for the purpose of marketing. Just like some people like Ford and some people prefer Toyota, choosing a brand is a complex process of personal preference and looking at the various options available within each brand. I am happy to talk about the pros and cons of individual brands of yoga with my students – however this article is about styles, not brands. Styles of yoga can be differentiated from one another on the basis of their philosophy and practice. Bhakti yoga, for example, uses devotion as the cornerstone of practice. You are much more likely to see bhakti yoga being practiced in a church than in a yoga studio. Jnana yoga uses knowledge of the cornerstone of practice. Jnana is related to the greek work “gnosis” or “gnostic” which means intellectual or spiritual understanding of esoteric truths. Jnana=Gnosis=Knowledge. Jnana yogis seek freedom through understanding. Karma yoga uses everyday actions, such as our family and work life, as spiritual practice. As explained in the Bhagavad Gita:

“Work done with selfish motives is inferior by far to the selfless service or Karma-yoga. Therefore be a Karma-yogi, O Arjuna. Those who seek [to enjoy] the fruits of their work are verily unhappy.”

The yogas described in the Bhagavad Gita (Bhakti, Jnana, and Karma) make no mention of hatha yoga. Hatha yoga developed in the medieval period of Indian history, starting around 1200 CE and continuing even today. Hatha, a Sanskrit word, can be translated as ‘violence’ or ‘force’ and is associated with hitting, striking, and insistence. Hatha yoga was codified in the 17th Century text attributed to Svātāmara, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (a pradipika is a lamp). *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika* is one of a great deal of medieval yoga texts that give instruction in yoga asanas (postures), pranayama (breathing), bandhas(energetic locks), and kriyas (cleansing techniques). What distinguished hatha yoga from its predecessors was not the use of asana and pranayama, but the emphasis on asana and pranayama as the centerpiece of hatha yoga practice. Until the emergence of hatha yoga asana and pranayama were seen as adjuncts to mantra and meditation. Placing asana and pranayama at the heart of yoga practice changed not only the nature of yoga instruction but, perhaps more importantly the attitude of yoga practitioners.

Hatha yoga is a body-focused yoga – however this has been confused with a focus on the physical body. Hatha yogis, such as Gorakhnath (author of many medieval hatha yoga texts), have long recognized that intimate relationship between the physical body, the energetic body, and the mind. Postural imbalances in the physical body often lend themselves to an energetic experience of being tired or listless, which can then lead to a depressed mental state. Conversely, a jubilant mental state that arises from receiving really great news can lead to a feeling of elation which generally makes people

stand and sit taller and walk with more lightness in their step. There is no reason to believe that such a thing as “purely physical yoga” can exist. What makes hatha yoga interesting is its utilization of this mind-energy-body connection to effect transformations in hatha yogis. Hatha yogis must also be jnana yogis – for we must first understand these connections in order to take advantage of them. But we don’t stop there. We are the hackers of the yoga world.

Hatha yoga is the forceful yoga because we are not asking for transformation, as in bhakti yoga, we are forcing ourselves into transformation. Hatha yogis are aggressive creatures. The word aggression is derived from the latin ‘aggress’ which means to approach or to start an argument. Hatha yogis move forward, with force if necessary, through obstacles. That does not mean that hatha yogis are cruel or unfeeling. Generally speaking, the experience of working through your physical tensions and neurotic tendencies tends to create extremely sensitive and empathetic people.

In terms of the long history of yoga, hatha yoga is a newcomer on the scene. As a style of yoga, hatha is extremely effective at creating transformation in its practitioners. The downside is that hatha yogis tend to be very confident, independent, and powerful personalities. While that may not, on the surface, seem like much a downside, in the context of the long history of yoga it is problematic to say the least. Hatha yoga builds strong bodies, and those strong bodies tend to house strong egos. Strong egos are much more tenacious in terms of the spiritual practice of unburdening ourselves from our attachments and aversions. While hatha yoga may succeed in unlocking your tight hamstrings and creating more calm and stability in your mind, it may also succeed in evoking envy, pride, and hubris.

So I teach hatha yoga. But I don’t think we should stop there. I have experienced the tremendous transformational power of hatha yoga and as a result I am enthusiastic in helping other people awaken their body and mind through this amazing practice. However, hatha yoga is the outermost layer on a truly gigantic jawbreaker of awakening. I plan to keep teaching and practicing to see what flavors reveal themselves next.