





# **From the Body to the Overself**

**Beyond Hatha Yoga**

**Dewar Adair**



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For Kirti

“That which connects the individual man<sup>1</sup> to the Universal Spirit, I call the Overself. This connection can never be broken. Its existence is the chief guarantee that there is hope of salvation for all not merely for those who think their group alone will be granted it.”

Paul Brunton<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Brunton wrote at a time when it was customary to write using “he” instead of “he or she”. But his writings are meant for all those who find inspiration in his work.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are with the kind permission of Larson Publications and the Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation.

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## FOREWORD

There are many very good books and reference works on hatha yoga and yoga in general, not to mention the countless yogic scriptures written by yogis and their students down the centuries.

I am writing this book more as a guide for my students and for those who may long for new perspectives beyond the hatha yoga mainstream. Apart from a few exceptions, I have not included any instructions on asanas or on pranayama techniques. There are very good and detailed practice books for this.

Rather, it is meant to give practitioners of hatha yoga a certain orientation in their daily yoga practice and in reading the spiritual scriptures, whether they come from the Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan traditions or from our own equally deep tradition in the West. Those who seriously search will find what they are looking for anywhere.

The idea for this book was born from my own practice and from many years of experience as a hatha yoga teacher and my earlier years as a teacher of Aikido.

My own search began with the reading of “Tao Te Ching” by Master Lao-Tzu, a Taoist work that has accompanied me throughout my life to this very day. At that time, I was

19 years old and had never heard of Taoism, let alone spirituality. I was a convinced Marxist and enthusiastic about "dialectical materialism". The idea that we are all connected with each other and that the eternal, intransient Tao flows through us was not at all acceptable to an "angry young man" such as myself at that time. Nevertheless, this little masterpiece from the 7th century BCE continued to fascinate me over the years to come. I always carried it with me and could not escape it. It felt like an eddy, pulling me more and more into it. This magical and omnipresent, flowing Tao became more and more a part of my view of the world.

The "Tao Te Ching", together with the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads and the works of the English philosopher and sage Paul Brunton, is still one of my favourite and most inspiring readings.

In the mid-1970s, I came into contact with the writings and ideas of the still relatively unknown genius Wilhelm Reich. Especially his middle and late work on vegetotherapy and the discovery of "Orgone" fascinated me. With the term "Orgone" Wilhelm Reich meant exactly the same as the Tao, an energy / power flowing through the universe and us human beings.

A few years later I did psychotherapy based on Reich and Gerda Boysen (a ground-breaking massage therapist from Norway) and was able to experience in my own body what energy currents flow through us and how chronic blockages can dissolve.

From the 1980s until the early 1990s I practised and taught Aikido. Here this universally flowing force is called Ki (in Chinese Chi).

Some years ago, I came across the books of the English philosopher and sage Paul Brunton (1898-1981). This pioneer of spirituality travelled through many countries, especially in Asia, in his search for what he called Truth, until he found his teacher in Ramana Maharshi. From 1934 until the 1950s he wrote and published books, articles, essays and notes on Eastern and Western philosophy and on his own spiritual quest. After that he retired from public life but continued to write daily notes. It was important to him to remain anonymous. He did not accept any students. His notes were collected posthumously from 1984 onwards and were arranged according to subjects into 16 volumes. Today these "Notebooks of Paul Brunton" are accessible to everyone on the website of the "Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation". They are an immense source of inspiration for all of us who, like him, want to know the ultimate truth about our existence. In a deep sense, this book is a tribute to this small, modest man, with the hope that his life's work will become better known in the hatha yoga community.

So, many of the ideas and experiences I am describing here are not new. Some of them I have adopted from teachers of very different spiritual traditions that I have had the good fortune to meet on my personal path. Although I am writing from the perspective of hatha yoga, I feel equally committed to other spiritual paths, which ultimately all lead back to one and the same source. The names and terms used are only sometimes different.

Nevertheless, I hope very much that I have recounted all these ideas and experiences faithfully and that they "ignite" in my students and other readers just as they once did in me. I have tried to see and to convey them in relation to our daily practice, both on the mat and in everyday life. Above all, I am aware that the knowledge imparted here was written down by me, but by no means belongs to me alone.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who helped me clarify these ideas in the many conversations we had, especially Andreas Buhr for the janitor/headmaster analogy, Ewan Bacon for his help with quantum physics, Ute Busch-Bernard for her motivating support and Kirti and Prema Seetharam for their meticulous proofreading and many helpful suggestions.

My very special thanks go to Dr Shrikrishna Bhushan Tengshe from Mumbai and Dr Bettina Bley from the Rosenwaldhof in Brandenburg. Without these two amazing people this book would not have been possible.

To be a teacher is a great privilege for me, but at the same time it comes with an obligation. On the one hand, there are the many teachers, still alive or passed away, who have enriched and delighted us all with their knowledge and experience. And, on the other hand, we have our own students, to whom we feel obliged and whom we would like to help to follow **their own** path of knowledge.

Without students there are no teachers, and without teachers there are no students. It is like an endless

continuum. Properly understood, they help each other on their respective paths.

Out of this feeling of gratitude I now dedicate this book to the many inspiring teachers and wish my own students and readers many new and, most importantly, **real-life** insights on their spiritual journey.

## INTRODUCTION

As described in the foreword, this work is intended for those who are just beginning to deal more intensively not only with physical practice, but also with the historical and philosophical background of hatha yoga.

Some people who want to go deeper into Indian spiritual philosophy may be a little disappointed because I will sketch it here only very briefly. For those who would like to learn more in this direction, I can recommend such excellent works as "The Deeper Dimension of Yoga" by Georg Feuerstein.

Nonetheless, my hope is that these readers will also discover new sources of inspiration and aspects that will enable them to explore their physical and meditative practice in even greater depth.

I have deliberately abstained from using lots of Sanskrit words, as I feel this would make it more difficult to read. Moreover, I understand yoga as a spiritual discipline that is universal and can be described by parallels in our traditions in the West. If you read the writings of Hildegard von Bingen or Meister Eckhart, to name only two self-realized persons from our own latitudes, it becomes apparent that the essence of yoga cannot be reduced to India alone.

Furthermore, as mentioned above in the foreword, we have in the life's work of Paul Brunton an almost inexhaustible source of spiritual wisdom that combines the best of East and West.

In the coming chapters I would like to take us all on an unusual journey: from the body to the Overself. As with all journeys, there is the danger of stopping somewhere along the way. Perhaps where you are now is too beautiful to continue; or the obstacles you have to overcome are too difficult and you give up; or you have simply lost your way and have arrived somewhere you did not want to be.

Either way, we have lost sight of the big picture. But so that this does not happen to us, I will remind us of the reason for our journey at each stage on the way. The quotations by Paul Brunton will also accompany us and serve us as an orientation.

The journey begins with the question of what hatha yoga exactly is and what relevance it might have for the person of the 21st century.

# YOGA AS A PATH OF KNOWLEDGE

## What exactly is Hatha Yoga?

According to the philosopher and yoga historian Georg Feuerstein, there are at least 40 forms of yoga, 39 of which have nothing to do with physical exercises. So the question arises, what is the real significance of the yoga form that mainly consists of physical exercises, namely hatha yoga?

In one of the classical texts on hatha yoga, "Hathapradīpikā" (sometimes called "Hathayoga Pradīpikā"), (dated approx. 1350 - 1550), the author and Yogi Svātmārāma writes that the body is systematically prepared by purifying and preparing the body through various techniques (pranayama, kriyas, mudras, bandhas). These include postures (so-called asanas). However, according to Svātmārāma the aim of these asanas is to prepare the body for the practice of raja yoga (the royal path).

According to Svātmārāma, raja yoga is the way inwards through meditation and the union with the Universal Spirit - from a yogic point of view our true nature, our Self.

In the words of Svātmārāma:

"Neither can Haṭha (Yoga) be perfected without Rājayoga nor Rājayoga be attained without practicing Haṭha (Yoga).

Hence one should practise both until the stage of Niṣpatti (is reached).”<sup>1</sup>

He goes even further and says:

“Those who do not aim at success in Rājayoga are mere practitioners of Haṭha. I believe the labour of these striving aspirants to be fruitless.”<sup>2</sup>

Hatha yoga is a spiritual path and joins the countless spiritual paths that humanity has developed in its long history to reunite with the Universal Spirit. It is especially suitable for people who understand work on the body as a possibility of devotion to the Universal Spirit and want to practise it as such.

### **How relevant is Hatha Yoga nowadays?**

To answer this question, we must distinguish between hatha yoga as a form of recreational sport and hatha yoga as a spiritual discipline.

In our modern, noisy and hectic world, hatha yoga is an excellent way to achieve equilibrium. It helps to soothe tired limbs, to get the cardiovascular system going, and provides relaxation and recuperation. For almost every person there is now an individual style and flavour, from power yoga to kundalini yoga to aerial yoga. The variety on offer increases almost daily.

But this has very little to do with hatha yoga as it has developed over the centuries. Thanks to recent research by

Mark Singleton in his book, "Yoga Body - The Origins of Modern Posture Practice", we now know that there is no unbroken tradition from the mythical beginnings of hatha yoga with Gorakṣa Nātha and his teacher Matsyendra Nātha (9th or 10th century) to the present day. On the contrary. Hatha yoga has been exposed to new influences over the centuries and has changed constantly. Especially in the 19th and 20th century it was strongly influenced by the fitness culture imported to India from the USA and Germany, by bodybuilding and by the physical exercise systems used to train parts of the European military.

In the two classical texts of hatha yoga, Hathayoga Pradīpikā and Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā, only 16 and 32 asanas respectively are mentioned. The idea that hatha yoga had hundreds, if not thousands of asanas is as unimaginable as the absurd claim that the salutation to the sun (*sūryanamaskār*) is mentioned in the Vedic scriptures thousands of years ago. According to the research of Mark Singleton<sup>3</sup>, the salutation to the sun is an invention around the beginning of the 20th century by the Rajah of Aundh, Pratinidhi Pant, who was himself a passionate bodybuilder. The vast majority of asanas practiced today are most likely 100 to 150 years old and are largely the result of a fusion with the above-mentioned systems of fitness and physical training.

Although modern postural hatha yoga is more of an eclectic collection from diverse sources, it is clearly very helpful as a relaxing and beneficial balance to our performance-oriented society of the 21st century.

But if we seek a spiritual discipline in hatha yoga, we are faced with many questions. For example, how was hatha yoga practised in the past? What exactly is kundalini and how is it activated? Why do the various schools differ in the number and location of the chakras? How is pranayama correctly performed? We will probably never be able to answer these and similar questions correctly since the hathayogic scriptures handed down are written in a highly cryptic and enigmatic language. They allow countless possibilities of interpretation. Furthermore, as already mentioned, there is no uninterrupted tradition from that age that could elucidate for us the true meaning of the scriptures.

Even though we may have no direct access to the original practice of hatha yoga, we can read indirectly from the scriptures how intense the practice must have been. For example, just practising *pancadharana*, as described in Gheranda Samhita<sup>4</sup>, would take 10 hours. In addition, there are the dietary and various ascetic requirements. The yogis of that time had no children to look after, no profession to pursue, no aging parents to care for. They were full-time yogis who had set themselves the goal of making the breakthrough to their divine nature in this incarnation, come what may. It is not without reason that the Sanskrit word "hatha" can be translated as "powerful", "energetic", "aggressive", even "violent".<sup>5</sup>

Taking all of this into account with regard to our modern world, we quickly come to the conclusion that hatha yoga raises more questions than it provides answers, and as a

practicable spiritual discipline is rather unsuitable for a person of the 21st century.

But this does not necessarily mean that the hathayogic practices, done in moderation, must completely disappear from our spiritual discipline. It is more important that these practices, especially the body and breath work, serve the original purpose, namely, to open the body from within as a preparation for meditation. We can also draw on the insights of Western pioneers such as Wilhelm Reich, Gerda Boysen and Paul Brunton to complement and deepen our spiritual practice.

But before we turn to the subject of practice and these pioneers, it is worthwhile to give a brief overview of spirituality from a yogic perspective, so that we can better understand the overall context in which our physical practice takes place.