

HATHA YOGA

Benefits and Principles for a More Meaningful Practice

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LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- To understand Yoga more fully by learning about the eight limbs of Yoga. More specifically, to understand the *yamas* and *niyamas*, or ethical principles for living well, enough to be able to incorporate these principles both on and off the mat for a more meaningful practice.

Key words:

Benefits of Yoga, Mindfulness, Eight Limbs of Yoga, Yamas, Niyamas

INTRODUCTION

Hatha Yoga is classified in the Western world as one type of mind-body exercise (along with Tai Chi, Qi Gong, Pilates, and others) and a type of complementary and alternative medicine that has become a popular and effective form of exercise in healthy, clinical, and athletic populations because of the numerous health and fitness benefits associated with a regular practice (9). Hatha Yoga involves the practice of physical postures in conjunction with awareness of the breath to help develop mental focus and to connect the mind, body, and spirit. Beyond the physical practice, there are some principles of Yoga that may not be very well known by contemporary fitness enthusiasts that can enhance an existing Yoga practice and offer additional lifestyle benefits.

The purpose of this article is threefold: to familiarize health and fitness professionals and exercisers considering or already involved in a Yoga practice with the many benefits of a regular Yoga practice, to provide a more in-depth look at Yoga via the eight limbs of Yoga (the components of a yogic lifestyle), and to introduce and explain the *yamas* and *niyamas* and ways to incorporate them on and off the mat. With this

article, individuals who wish to take their Yoga practice from a solely physical exercise to a deeper practice incorporating mindfulness-based lifestyle changes will be able to do so.

THE BENEFITS OF A REGULAR YOGA PRACTICE

The regular practice of Hatha Yoga enhances strength, flexibility, and balance and may offer some light to moderate aerobic conditioning as well, depending on the style practiced. Other benefits may be gained from incorporating breath work (*pranayama*) and meditation as part of, or in addition to, a Hatha Yoga practice. These practices have been shown to provide beneficial effects in numerous health conditions including, but not limited to, cancer, heart disease, asthma, infertility, pregnancy, insomnia, arthritis, fibromyalgia, carpal

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Hatha Yoga

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tunnel syndrome, and chronic back pain. Some of the benefits of Yoga and mind-body stress reduction and relaxation (MBSR), a combination of mindfulness meditation practices and Yoga, from empirical research are provided in Table 1 (2,3,6–9,11).

Two caveats are worth noting: if using Yoga to manage a specific condition, a Yoga teacher who is trained or certified in Yoga therapy is recommended (5); and the frequency, duration, and intensity of a Yoga practice determine the amount of improvement or benefits obtained, whether they are physical or physiological, cognitive/psychological, and emotional or spiritual.

For many fitness enthusiasts, it is the physical discipline and opportunity to improve fitness that attracts them to Yoga, but continued practice may lead them to the realization that there is much more to be gained. A Hatha Yoga practice may be used by anyone as a way to increase fitness, improve health, attain or restore greater balance and connectedness of mind-body-spirit, and develop mental focus and discipline. With the help of a skilled teacher and credible resources, incorporating other Yoga techniques into a physical Hatha Yoga practice may open the door to attaining additional health benefits, enhanced stress management, and a more meaningful Hatha Yoga experience.

A MORE IN-DEPTH LOOK AT YOGA

Yoga, meaning “yoke” or “union” (12) of the mind, body, and spirit, was developed over 4,000 years ago as a spiritual practice (6). It was a way to deepen meditation and gain self-actualization, which is an understanding of one’s intrinsic wholeness and connectedness in the present moment (5). In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali, recognized as the codifier of Yoga, defined Yoga as: “control of the thought waves of the mind” (10, p. 15), which implies that Yoga as a philosophy and lifestyle practice goes beyond the physical practice of *asanas* or postures.

The name Hatha (the practice of physical postures) is made up of two components: “HA” meaning “sun,” the positive current in the body, and “THA” meaning “moon,” the negative current in the body. Hatha Yoga symbolizes the equilibrium between these two energies. Within the branch of Hatha Yoga, there are many different types or styles ranging from more passive forms (e.g., Restorative Yoga) to very active forms (e.g., Ashtanga and Vinyasa or Power Yoga). Several selected styles of Hatha Yoga are briefly described in Table 2.

THE EIGHT LIMBS OF YOGA

Patanjali created a coherent Yoga practice consisting of eight limbs, which serve as guidelines for living a meaningful and purposeful life and serve as a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline. The limbs also direct our attention to our health (14) and help us to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of our nature and assist us in living a life of balance and connectedness. The eight limbs of Yoga are as follows: the *yamas*, the *niyamas*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi* (12,14). These are listed and described briefly in Table 3 and addressed in more depth in the following sections.

The *yamas* and *niyamas*, the first and second limbs of Yoga, respectively, are principles for living that incorporate morality or ethics, concentration or meditation, and wisdom (1). They are “ten ethical precepts that allow us to be at peace with



TABLE 1: Health Benefits Associated With Yoga and MBSR

Health Benefits	
Cardiovascular and related diseases	Fibromyalgia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced sympathetic dominance/increased parasympathetic activation • reduced blood pressure • reduced resting heart rate • reduced cholesterol • reduced blood glucose levels • improved lipid profile • decrease in inflammatory markers (interleukin 6, C-reactive protein) • improved endothelial function • decreased body weight • reduced waist-hip ratio 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reductions in chronic pain
	Infertility
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced stress and improved hormonal functioning? • increased blood flow to pelvis and reproductive organs balance
	Pregnancy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced anxiety and negative affect • higher birth weights and fewer low-birth weight babies
	Headaches
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced stress • increased blood flow to tense muscles promoting relaxation • increased body awareness and improved control of muscle tension
Cancer	Back pain
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decreased nausea and physical distress • increased feelings of well-being • positive shifts in locus of control • improved coping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased muscle relaxation • improved muscle balance • increased spinal flexibility (flexion and extension, right and left lateral flexion)
	Insomnia
Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced muscle tension • increased parasympathetic activation • increased CO₂ from breathing techniques promoting a sedative effect • increased ability to let go of obsessive, worrisome thoughts • reduced stress and sleep disturbance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced anxiety • reduced depression • improved mood 	

ourselves, our family, and our community” (5, p. 6). More detailed descriptions of each of the *yamas* and *niyamas* along with recommendations for incorporating these principles in a Hatha Yoga practice (on the mat) and in our lives (off the mat)

are provided after a brief discussion of the other eight limbs of Yoga.

The practice of *asana*, or physical posture, was developed as a way to align, strengthen, and balance the body to keep it healthy

TABLE 2: Selected Hatha Yoga Styles (15)

Anusara Yoga	Based on the Tantric philosophy of intrinsic goodness, Anusara Yoga helps students see the good in all their postures and encourages a creative and playful practice that incorporates breath, as well as attitude, alignment, and action. Spiritual connectedness is emphasized.
Ashtanga Yoga	Intensely physical and athletic, Ashtanga Yoga is a prescribed set of asanas, with emphasis on channeling energy through the body using <i>bandhas</i> (locks), and concentration on singular points using <i>drishti</i> (gaze) points.
Bikram Yoga	Performed in nearly 100°F temperature, Bikram Yoga is a sequenced series of 26 traditional Hatha postures.
Integral Yoga	With emphasis on gentle poses and meditation, Integral Yoga uses the physical poses as a path to quieting the body and mind for deep meditation.
Iyengar Yoga	Focused on developing strength, endurance, and correct body alignment, in addition to flexibility and relaxation, Iyengar Yoga individualizes poses to each person’s body type and special physical needs. Props, such as blocks, bolsters, blankets, and belts, are commonly used.
Kripalu Yoga	With emphasis on meditation and breath work, Kripalu Yoga encourages inward focus and spiritual attunement to initiate a gradual process of physical healing, psychological growth, and spiritual awakening.
Kundalini Yoga	Using sound, breath, and posture, Kundalini Yoga aims to develop spiritual awareness by freeing the serpent power (<i>kundalini</i>) that is coiled in the base of the spine and drawing it upward through the seven chakras.
Vinyasa Yoga	Cultivating an awareness that links each action to the next, Vinyasa Yoga connects <i>asanas</i> into a series and coordinates movement with breath.

TABLE 3: The Eight Limbs of Yoga (12,14)

1. The <i>Yamas</i>	<i>Ahimsa</i> — nonviolence, nonharming
	<i>Satya</i> — truthfulness
	<i>Asteya</i> — nonstealing
	<i>Bramacharya</i> — moderation, restraint, continence
	<i>Aparigraha</i> — noncovetousness, non_hoarding
2. The <i>Niyamas</i>	<i>Saucha</i> — cleanliness, purity
	<i>Santosha</i> — contentment
	<i>Tapas</i> — discipline, heat, spiritual austerities
	<i>Svadyaya</i> — study of the sacred scriptures and of one's self
	<i>Ishvara Pranidhana</i> — surrender to God, devotion
3. <i>Asana</i>	Physical postures: forward bending, backward bending, lateral bending, twists, and inversions
4. <i>Pranayama</i>	Releasing and channeling of <i>prana</i> or the body's life force; more commonly, breath control or breathing exercises
5. <i>Pratyahara</i>	Sense withdrawal — withdrawal of external stimuli and turning the senses inward
6. <i>Dharana</i>	Concentration — focus on a single mental object: a specific energetic center in the body, an image, a mantra
7. <i>Dhyana</i>	Meditation — uninterrupted flow of concentration; the mind has been quieted and produces few or no thoughts
8. <i>Samadhi</i>	Contemplation, absorption, or superconscious state; also, a state of ecstasy or bliss

and to serve as “a vehicle for centering within the body or quieting and calming the mind” (11, p. 1) to prepare the body to be able to sit still for deep meditation. *Asana* is distinguished from a stretch or calisthenic exercise in that its practice involves focusing the mind's complete attention in the body (11).

Pranayama (breath control or life force extension) is at the core of Hatha Yoga practice and involves releasing and channeling *prana*, or the body's life force, to nurture optimal physical health and mental clarity, which help lead us to self-knowledge and a wholesome, authentic life (13). It is incorporated in both *asana* and *dhyana* (meditation) and “consists of techniques designed to gain mastery over the respiratory process while recognizing the connecting between the breath, the mind, and the emotions” (14, p. 2). *Pranayama* can be practiced as an isolated technique, or one can integrate it into a regular Hatha Yoga practice.

During deep relaxation or *shavasana* (corpse pose), *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal) is implemented. The practice of *pratyahara* is a time to make a conscious effort to draw our awareness away from external stimuli and the outside world and turn our senses inward. *Pratyahara* gives us an opportunity to step back and look within, at ourselves, our cravings and habits that may be detrimental to our health and which likely interfere with inner growth (14). This time is said to be when all the postures become integrated and the benefits of Yoga are received.

Dharana (concentration) and *dhyana* (meditation) are related. In an “untrained” mind, most meditation consists of concentration exercises. However, with practice, “true” meditation can occur. Meditation is such a complex topic, and there are many forms of meditation and many techniques. One source with detailed information regarding meditation is *Passage*

Meditation: Bringing the Deep Wisdom of the Heart into Daily Life (4). Concentration may be incorporated during the practice with intense focus on the subtle movements in the body or on the breath during *asana*.

Samadhi, meaning contemplation, absorption, or superconscious state; or a state of ecstasy or bliss, is the eighth and final stage of the eight limb path. It is the transcendence of Self, when the meditator comes to realize a profound connection to the Divine and to all living things (14). *Samadhi* is said to be the way to becoming a living liberated being or *jivanmukta* (12). It is the attainment of the ultimate stage of Yoga — enlightenment — and cannot be bought or possessed, only experienced as a result of continual devotion (14).

SIMPLE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR APPLYING THE YAMAS AND NIYAMAS ON AND OFF THE MAT

Note: The following suggestions for applying Yogic codes of living as identified in the *yamas* and *niyamas* are drawn from various sources (5,10,12,14) as well as the authors' experiences.

The *Yamas*

Ahimsa (nonviolence, nonharming): in our Yoga practice, we should seek to be nonharming to ourselves by cultivating awareness and respecting our bodies with its abilities and limitations, rather than forcing our bodies into postures beyond our current abilities and avoiding negative self talk and self-judgment. We also can practice *ahimsa* toward others by letting go of judgment of and competition with them on our mats. We can practice kindness toward others on and off our mats in a variety of ways, by listening, being present, and practicing compassion and offering assistance when we can. We can treat all beings and all things with care and compassion.

Satya (truthfulness): practicing *satya* means being honest with ourselves, being truthful in our feelings, thoughts, words, and actions (*palkhivala*). We also can try to view ourselves objectively, seeing ourselves clearly and honestly, rather than filtering how we see ourselves through the eyes or opinions of others. We can look at the big pictures of our poses or our lives, rather than just the flattering (or unflattering) parts.

Asteya (nonstealing): we can implement *asteya* in our practice by being courteous to others around us. This can include arriving for class on time, not talking while the teacher is trying to give instruction, following the practice as guided, and not taking away from anyone else's experience. We also can give each posture our full energy, rather than holding back or stealing energy to do the next pose. *Asteya* can be practiced off our mats by operating out of an abundance-based perception of the universe rather than one grounded in scarcity. It can be practiced in giving credit where credit is due and by living "greener" so that we are not taking away from future generations or the earth.

Brahmacharya (restraint, moderation, continence): *brahmacharya* can be interpreted and practiced in many different ways. We can practice *brahmacharya* by consciously choosing to use our life force to express our dharma, our true nature and mission or purpose, rather than to dissipate it frivolously in the pursuit of temporary pleasures (*palkhivala*). We can be aware of underdoing and overdoing in our lives and try to keep everything in moderation by listening, feeling, and tuning into our bodies and their needs both on and off our mats. Moderation in consumption, behaviors, and finding a better work-life balance reflect *brahmacharya*.

Aparigraha (noncovetousness, nonhoarding): this is the opposite of greediness. On our mats, this can mean not being greedy for the teacher's attention and realizing that the rest of the class is deserving of the instructor's adjustments and attention as we are. *Aparigraha* can be expressed off of our mats in our purchases of material goods. We can buy what we need rather than out of desire for having more and more clothes, a bigger faster car, a nicer house, and so on. We can be more

aware of our actual needs and seek to meet them instead of always wanting more.

The Niyamas

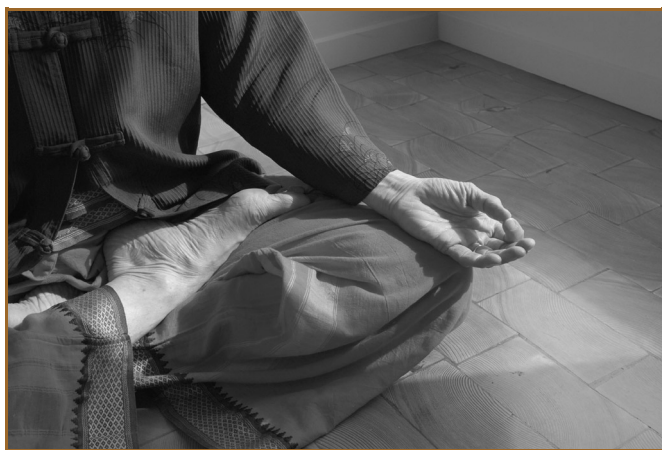
Saucha (cleanliness, purity): *saucha* can refer to cleanliness or purity of thought, feeling, or deed. Some simple ways to implement *saucha* in our Yoga practice is to keep our Yoga clothes, mats, and props (e.g., blocks, straps, blankets) clean and orderly. We also can be aware of what is going on internally in terms of our thoughts and feelings and choose to shift those to purer, healthier, and more positive ways of thinking and feeling — about ourselves as we practice Yoga and about others on and off our mats. We also can change our behavior by avoiding things that make us feel guilty and practicing things that are meaningful and give purpose to our lives.

Santosa (contentment): in Yoga, *santosa* can be practiced by accepting performing an *asana* to the best of our ability in that moment rather than pursuing the perfect posture or most advanced posture possible. This does not mean that we should avoid trying to stretch ourselves and improve our Yoga practice, but that we should focus on accepting what we can do and work at our own levels in ways that are safe and effective for our bodies. Off our mats, we can practice gratitude for who we are, what we have, and the people in our lives. We can learn to be accepting of our abilities, our accomplishments, and our situations and to look for the good in all.

Tapas (discipline, heat, spiritual austerities): *tapas* can be developed and honed by the regular practice of Yoga. Through a regular Yoga practice, we establish self-discipline and passion that can transfer to other aspects of a healthy lifestyle. Also, in holding poses for longer periods or in attempting poses that are difficult for us physically or otherwise, we develop the ability to be "uncomfortably comfortable" in other situations in our lives as well. We learn perseverance, and we may learn when it does not serve us to continue in a pose or situation when it is no longer beneficial to us.

Svadhyaya (study of the sacred scriptures and of one's self): through the study of sacred texts, we learn to see things in different ways, including how we practice Yoga as a physical discipline, as well as how we are embracing life's journey. On our mats, we can be aware of the physical sensations, thoughts, and feelings or emotions that arise during our Yoga practice. We can learn more about ourselves by cultivating this awareness off our mats, as well. We can learn to discern our motives more clearly and choose different ways of thinking and acting that are more closely aligned with a Yogic lifestyle, that is, that reflect kindness, truthfulness, nonstealing, moderation, noncoveting, purity, contentment, and discipline.

Ishvara pranidhana (surrender to God, devotion): on one level, *ishvara pranidhana* means allowing ourselves to be receptive and letting go of the things that we cannot control. It is our intentions and our efforts that count. We will learn to do Yoga with both



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intensity and calmness when we dedicate our practice to the universal life force, of which, we are all a part (*palkhivala*). On another level, *ishvara pranidhana* refers to a spiritual faith and relationship built through worship, which may occur in many forms. The usages of *sankalpa*, or affirmations or even prayers, may be useful in practicing *ishvara pranidhana*.

CONCLUSIONS

The ancient practice of Hatha Yoga is now a mainstream form of exercise whose attractions include multiple health and fitness benefits. Those who wish to deepen or intensify their Hatha Yoga practice beyond *asana* can accomplish this by adding one or more of the other limbs of Yoga on and off the mat, perhaps starting by incorporating one of the *yamas* or *niyamas*. By approaching Yoga from a new perspective, we may experience enhanced health and fitness as well as changes and benefits that extend beyond our mats, taking our practice of Hatha Yoga to more holistic and connected experience.

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CONDENSED VERSION AND BOTTOM LINE

Hatha Yoga is a popular form of physical activity and a type of mind-body exercise. A regular Yoga practice can improve strength, flexibility, and balance; reduce stress; and provide many therapeutic benefits as well. The physical practice of Yoga is just one part of a Yogic lifestyle, which incorporates eight limbs. By incorporating some of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, two of the eight limbs of Yoga that provide ethical principles for living, a Yoga practitioner can move from a purely physical practice toward a more meaningful practice and complete yogic experience.