

Styles of Yoga

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Hatha, Ashtanga, Vinyasa, Kundalini... They are all popular yoga "styles", but for many people these can be confusing definitions. What is the actual meaning of these words, and what is their historical root?

It is one of the most common questions that I receive before, during or after a yoga class: what is the difference between Hatha Yoga, Classic Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Ashtanga or Vinyasa?

For those that are familiar with the history of the yoga tradition this question probably doesn't make much sense, because all these names represent simply some different variations of a system of physical Hatha Yoga exercises which has its roots in the tradition of the Tantric Natha Yogis and their ancient text called Hatha Yoga Pradipika.

So, in reality, all these modern yoga "styles" are actually different forms of Hatha Yoga.

Confused?

So, let's try to clarify the whole thing starting from the very beginning…

First of all, the name Yoga in the ancient times was not used to indicate physical exercises, Yoga for the people of ancient India was considerate a state of realisation. The realisation of the Self.

The ancient philosophers in India were a bit like the ancient Greek philosophers, they wanted to find an answer to questions like "exists a soul?", "exists life after death?", "how to be happy?", etc…

So, to find answers to these questions they developed very subtle philosophical schools like Samkhya (6th-century BCE) where they tried to analyse rationally different aspects of the human life and of the Universe.

Through their deep philosophical investigations they came to the conclusion that the Universe is formed by 2 principles: Consciousness and Energy.

Consciousness is a state of pure, peaceful awareness from where is possible to witness the various qualities (Gunas) expressed by the Energy of the universe. So, they called "Yoga" the harmonic union of these 2 principles, and they developed various techniques of meditation to have a human experience of this state of Union.

So, in those ancient times the yogis used to spend most of their life practising deep meditations to come to a level of subtle perception that could allow them to feel themselves "connected" to the whole Universe. Their consciousness was "in union" with all the various, possible manifestations of life's creative power inside and outside themselves. For a long period since these ancient times this experience of Union was the actual meaning of the word Yoga.

A group of these ancient yogis understood that in order to practice meditation daily for many hours it was necessary to train properly the body and the senses, so they developed a series of physical exercises that could help them to have a better control over their body. This group of ancient yogis was belonging to Tantric schools and they used to be called Natha.

The name that they give to this system of physical exercises is "Hatha Yoga".

So the word Hatha Yoga comes from there, from the physical exercises (asanas/positions, control of the breath, control of some body functions) that they developed to make their body more healthy and disciplined, and to make their mind more focused and calm.

At some point (between 900 and 500 years ago) they started to write their knowledge on books, and around that time they wrote a text called Hatha Yoga Pradipika which for us nowadays represents the foundation of the system of the physical yoga.

These are the roots of Hatha Yoga, the physical exercises developed by the ancient tantric ascetics called Natha. By the way, these ancient philosophers/ascetics were not Vedic religious figures, they were living outside the religious casts of India, outside the villages, outside social conventions. They were free men, using their human body to research a philosophical, spiritual truth.

In more recent times (20th century), when the art of Hatha Yoga started to be seen with pride by some nationalistic groups in modern India, there has been an unpredictable renaissance of this ancient tradition.

So, figures like Kishnamacharya, Sivananda, Satyananda and a bit later Pattabhi Jois and Iyengar started to develop

their own interpretations of this ancient Hatha Yoga system.

Some of them, like Sivananda and Satyananda remained more closed to the original tantric views of this system. While others, like Pattabhi Jois and Iyengar, developed styles influenced more by modern gymnastic and martial art. So, the modern version of Hatha Yoga is often taught by schools related to Sivananda (a famous monk that used to be based in Rishikesh, Northern India) or by the Bihar Yoga School of Satyananda (even though there are also many other schools that practice Hatha Yoga in a traditional way, but they are less mainstream).

The school of Krishnamacharya, Pattabhi Jois and Iyengar on the other hand developed a different style, which blended together Hatha Yoga exercises with dynamic exercises belonging to Kalari (martial art from South India), and Western gymnastic.

The peculiarity of the school of Krishnamacharya and his pupils is that it does not accept to be called Hatha Yoga, the practitioners of this school prefer instead to say that their system derives directly from the Ashtanga Yoga of Patanjali (circa 2nd century BCE). This creates again some confusion, because in reality the authentic Ashtanga Yoga of Patanjali used to be purely a system of philosophy and meditation and it was not based on physical exercises like it is, partially, the Hatha Yoga tradition (which has been developed several centuries after Patanjali).

So, paradoxically, the Hatha Yoga approach that we find in schools like those of Sivananda are more close to the Ashtanga of Patanjali because they practice also forms of meditation (Pratyahara, Dharana, and Dhyana) while the modern Ashtanga of Pattabhi Jois is based only on physical exercises and not on sitting meditation (so, very different from the original system of Patanjali's Ashtanga).

To make things even a bit more confusing there is also another very popular modern school of yoga called "Kundalini Yoga";

Kundalini, traditionally, is again a concept belonging to the Tantric tradition, it represents the energy inside the human body that has to be awoken and unified with Shiva (Consciousness) in the Sahasrara Chakra. So here we are back again to the original philosophical principle of unification of Consciousness and Energy (the Self becomes aware of his infinite qualities, and so it experiences a conscious state of Union with them).

Though, the modern school of yoga called "Kundalini Yoga" has been created in the 20th century by Yogi Bhajan which was belonging to the Sikh religion. So, he blended inside his Kundalini Yoga school aspects belonging to the tantric tradition, to the Hatha Yoga tradition and to the Sikh tradition.

And in this way the modern Kundalini Yoga became a very interesting, effective and heterogeneous mix of many practices belonging to various Indian esoteric systems.

So, in synthesis:

Modern schools of Yoga like those of Sivananda and Satyananda are following quite traditional tantric practices belonging to classical Hatha Yoga, so we can call this modern schools Classical Hatha Yoga, or simply Classic Yoga or Hatha Yoga. Or, simply Yoga.

Other modern styles of Yoga based on the Mysore schools of Krishnamacharya, Pattabhi Jois and Iyengar are more physical oriented and less rooted on meditative tantric practices, even if they acknowledge the classical Ashtanga of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras as their source of inspiration. So we can probably call them "Ashtanga Vinyasa" (Vinyasa means flowing movement), or "Dynamic Hatha Yoga". Or, simply, Yoga.

And the Kundalini Yoga school can be referred as a modern yoga system for the awakening of the Kundalini energy through a mix of various Tantric, Hatha, and Bhakti practices. So, we can maybe call it "Modern Kundalini Yoga, or again, simply Yoga.

I know… this whole explanation might appear still a bit confusing because often many modern yoga schools present themselves using ancient words and ancient definitions, trying sometimes to give (consciously or not) an altered historical view of their practices. Understandably, they might do so in the effort of attracting more pupils, and of spreading more widely their beautiful yoga practices presenting them as very "ancient", "pure", "authentic";

In any case all these schools and styles contributed immensely to spread yoga around the world in the last 40 years, inspiring millions of people, and often creating many positive changes in our society (introducing people to meditation and vegetarianism, for example, or to ethical principles like Ahimsa, Satya and Santosha), so they definitely have an enormous value.

Though, perhaps we can express the hope that in the Yoga teacher training programs of the future the teachers will spend more time in giving a more clear view of the evolution of yoga through the history and of its authentic roots and meaning, so people in yoga classes can understand what they are doing without having to adhere to often confusing, colourful, parochial interpretations.

