

Yogic Techniques in Classical Hatha Yoga Texts: A Comparative Perspective

(With Reference to Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Gheranda Samhita and Siva Samhita)

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Abstract

Hatha Yoga, also called as “Forceful Yoga” is a path of Yoga, whose objective is to transcend the egoic consciousness and to realize the Self, or Divine Reality. However, the psycho spiritual technology of Hatha Yoga is predominantly focused on developing the body’s potential so that the body can withstand the onslaught of transcendental realization. Mystical states of consciousness can have a profound effect on the nervous system and the rest of the body. Nevertheless, the experience of ecstatic union occurs in the embodied state. This fact led to the development of Hatha Yoga. The founder of Hatha Yoga, Matsyendranath and his followers called, to steel the body, to bake it well, as the texts say.

This paper attempts to outline the techniques and tools of Hatha Yoga mentioned in the Classical Yoga texts, viz., *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, *Gheranda Samhita* and *Siva Samhita*. The limbs of Hatha Yoga, i.e., Shatkarmas, Asanas, Pranayama, Bandhas, Mudras, Pratyahara, Dhyana and Samadhi have been elaborated in these texts by their respective authors with minor variations in their sequence, names, methods following their own style. This paper enables the reader to overview the multitude of Hatha yoga techniques, their Sanskrit names, and sequence with reference to the classical texts of hatha yoga mentioned above. Other integral aspects of hatha yoga like mitahara, and obstacles are presented in a manner that may appeal to yoga students.

Key words: *hatha yoga, shatkarmas, asanas, pranayama, mudras, pratyahara, dhyana samadhi, mitahara, and guru.*

Introduction

Hatha Yoga is a method of preparing the human beings for spiritual awakening, and also a very important science of health. Since ancient times it has been used by rishis and yogis for self-realization, for relief and elimination of all kinds of diseases and defects. What makes this method of treatment so powerful and effective is the fact that it works in accordance with the principles of harmony and unification, rather than diversity. In yogic literature, we find a number of reliable texts on Hatha Yoga, such as *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (hereafter HYP) authored by Yogi Svatmarama (15th Century AD), *Goraksha Samhita* by Yogi Ghorakshnath (10th Century AD). Another text is *Gheranda Samhita* (hereafter GS) by the sage Gheranda (16th Century AD). A fourth major text is *Siva Samhita* (hereafter SS) where author is not known. Another text known as *Hatharatnavali* is written by Srinivasabhatta Mahayogi (17th Century AD). This paper mainly discusses the

techniques of hatha yoga mentioned in the three major classical texts viz., *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, *Gheranda Samhita* and *Siva Samhita*, and attempts to give a comparative outlook/bird's eye view of the various aspects such as the type of yoga each text prescribes, the number of chapters in each, yogic practices such as asana, shatkarma, pranayama, mudra, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi, and the concept of mitahara, and the role of guru.

Type of Yoga

HYP prescribes "Chaturanga Yoga", or four limbed yoga. GS which is a more comprehensive text prescribes "Saptanga Yoga". It is also called Ghatastha Yoga, as Gheranda muni compares the body to a pot. However, SS is divided into five chapters, and it is more of a philosophical/democratic treatise, in combination with hatha yoga techniques.

Chapterisation

HYP puts forth four chapters, which correspond to its four limbs, namely asana, pranayama, mudra and nadanusandhana. Shatkarma an important aspect of hatha yoga, is mentioned in the second chapter, as preparatory practice for pranayama. GS puts forth seven chapters corresponding to its seven limbs. They include shatkarma for purification, asana for strength, mudra for steadiness, pratyahara for dhairya, pranayama for lightness, dhyana for perception and samadhi for self-realization/isolation. SS consists of five chapters: First chapter explains the philosophical standpoints and means to liberation. Second chapter deals with microcosm, nadis and jivatma. Third chapter deals with prana vayus, importance of guru, the place suitable for yoga practice, mention of pranayama and its practice, four stages of yoga and the four asanas in detail. Fourth chapter explains the eleven mudras and the resultant siddhis. Fifth chapter describes obstacles to liberation, four types of aspirants, four kinds of yoga, the six psychic centers, the sacred triveni, and the Raja Yoga.

Techniques of Hatha Yoga

Shatkarmas

HYP prescribes six purificatory practices. The concerned sloka reads:

*"Dhautirvasthi sthatha netistratakam naulikam tatha
Kapalabhathi schaitani shatkarmani prachakshate"*

The six kinds of acts are - dhauti, vasthi, neti, trataka, nauli and kapalabhathi (HYP, 2.22). GS also prescribes six purificatory practices which are further classified into 21 different techniques. The concerned sloka reads:

*"Dhautirbasthi sthatha netirlauliki tratakam tatha
Kapalabhathi schaitani shatkarmani samacharet"*

Dhauti, basthi, neti, lauliki, tratakam, and kapalabhathi are the six acts to be practiced (GS, 1.12).

SS does not describe any purificatory practices unlike HYP and GS.

Evaluation

It is evident that HYP uses the term vasthi whereas GS uses the term basthi, and HYP uses the term 'nauli', while GS uses the term 'lauliki' for the same technique. In HYP, the technique trataka is mentioned before nauli, where as lauliki comes before trataka in GS. The only dhauti technique that is described in HYP is vastra dhauti.

GS offers a number of sub techniques under the six main techniques and definitely proves to have more therapeutic value. They are:

Four kinds of Dhauti

- 1) Antardhauti is internal cleansing. It is of four kinds: They are: a) Vatasara - cleansing the stomach with air; b) Varisara – shankhprakashalana; c) Agnisara - vahnisara (activating the digestive fire); and d) Bahiskrutam - rectal cleansing.
- 2) Dantadhauti is cleansing of oral cavity and frontal sinus. It is also of five types. They are: a) Dantamoola - cleansing of the teeth; b) Jihvashodhanam – cleansing the tongue; c) Karnadhauti - cleansing the ears; and d) Kapalarandra dhauti - frontal sinus cleansing.
- 3) Hriddhauti is cleansing the heart region. It is of three types: a) Vamana dhauti - Dhauti with water; b) Danda dhauti - Dhauti with stick; and c) Vastra dhauti - Dhauti with cloth.
- 4) Moolashodhanam is anal cleansing.

Thus there are 13 Dhauti practices/techniques described in GS.

Two types of Basthi

- 1) Jala basthi - yogic enema with water; and
- 2) Sushka basthi - dry yogic enema.

Neti

Neti is nasal cleansing with thread.

Lauliki

Lauliki is abdominal churning.

Trataka

Trataka is concentrated gazing.

Three kinds of Kapalabhati

Kapalabhati is frontal skull cleansing. It is of three kinds which includes 1) Vamakrama - air cleansing; 2) Vyutkrama - sinus cleansing; and 3) Shitkrama - mucus cleansing.

Thus 21 different practices of purification have been mentioned in GS.

Moreover, the HYP mentions the practice of “shatkarmas” in the second chapter after asana, and as a preparatory practice of pranayama and when there is accumulation of excess fat and phlegm only. Whereas, GS lays a special focus on shatkarmas by prescribing it as the first step in hatha yoga or Ghatashta Yoga. An entire chapter is devoted to the explanation of the multiple purification techniques. Another technique mentioned only in HYP is Gajakarani (HYP, 2.38) and is not included in the shatkarmas.

SS, though it does not instruct purificatory techniques, mentions that the knowledge of hatha yoga (gomukhasana and dhauti in chapter 5.5) are obstacles for raja yoga. This indicates that this text considers them as practices of hatha yoga.

Asana

HYP mentions 84 asanas, and gives the names and description of 15 asanas (HYP, 1.16-30). This text mentions “*Shrestasana Chatustaya*” comprising of Siddhasana (HYP, 1.33) also called guptasana/vajrasana/muktasana; Padmasana (HYP, 1.42); Simhasana (HYP, 1.47) which facilitates the three bandhas; and Bhadrasana (HYP, 1.48) also called Gorakshasana.

GS describes only 32 asanas out of the 84 important asanas (GS, 2.1-6).

SS describes only four main asanas out of 84 in chapter three. They include: Siddhasana (SS, 3.85); Padmasana (SS, 3.88); Ugrasana (SS, 3.92) also called as paschima uttana; and Swastikasana (SS, 3.97).

Evaluation

Siddhasana, padmasana, swastikasana, are common asanas for all the three texts. Siddhasana, padmasana, simhasana, bhadrasana, gomukasana, kukkutasana, koormasana, uttanakoormasana, swastikasana, paschimottanasana, mayurasana, matsyendrasana, dhanurasana, virasana are common for HYP and GS. It is interesting to note that both the texts give the same technique for all the above mentioned asanas. Paschimotthanasana known in HYP and GS is called as Ugrasana in SS.

Savasana in HYP is known as mritasana in GS. From the utility point of view, GS offers more number of asanas than the other two texts.

Three aspects of Pranayama

HYP states three aspects of pranayama namely rechaka, puraka and kumbhaka (HYP, 2.69).

Eight types of Kumbhaka

HYP mentions eight types of kumbhaka (HYP, 2.44). They include suryabhedha, ujjayi, sitkari, sheethali, bhastrika, bhramari, moorcha, and plavini. Kumbhaka again is of two types as said in HYP, i.e., sahitha and kevali.

GS also talks of “ashtakumbhakas” (GS, 5.46). They are: sahitha, suryabhedha, ujjayi, sheethali, bhastrika, bhramari, moorcha, and kevali. Sahitha kumbhaka is of two types - sagarba and nigarba.

SS mentions the technique of Kumbhaka (inhale through left nostril, hold the breath, exhale through right) without mentioning any specific name, and prescribes its practice for 20 rounds. This text mentions the practice of “sodasa pranayama” (SS, 3.50) and describes that pranayama has four stages – arambha, ghata, parichaya and nishpatthi (SS, 3.29). This text also mentions some techniques under breath control which resemble those of ujjayi and sitkari of HYP.

Note: The practice of ‘nadishodhana’ is suggested before the practice of shatkarmas in HYP and the practice of ‘nadishuddhi’ before kumbhakas in GS. It is important to note that the nadishuddhi of GS is achieved by two different techniques - samanu and nirmanu. The “sitkari” kumbhaka is absent in GS, while this text included sahitha and kevali kumbhaka into the ashtakumbhakas. The best ratio of retention is given by GS as 20:80:40.

SS mentions four stages in pranayama which are actually attributed to stages of nadanusandhana in HYP. It is interesting to note that asanas are instructed after the practice of Pranayama in SS.

Mudra

HYP prescribes the practice of 10 mudras called as ‘dasa mudras’ (HYP, 3.6). Another two techniques named sahajoli (HYP, 3.92-94) and amaroli (HYP, 3.96-97) are described after vajroli, though they are not mentioned in the “dasa mudras”.

GS prescribes the practice of 25 mudras (GS, 3.1-3). SS mentions 11 mudras (SS, 4.5 and 4.14).

Evaluation

Both HYP and SS declare that mudras should be practiced for awakening the sleeping Goddess Kundalini and prescribed them after the practice of pranayama. However, in GS, mudra is instructed before the practice of pranayama.

All the mudras of HYP and SS are mentioned in GS. The techniques of some mudras such as vajroli and saktichalana are slightly different in GS from that in HYP. The bandhatraya viz., uddiyana, mula and jalandhara are mentioned as part of mudras in all the three texts. They are not given as separate techniques.

Pratyahara

Pratyahara, as a technique is discussed in detail in the fourth chapter of GS as well as mentioned in the third chapter of SS (3.57). This technique is not discussed in HYP.

Dharana

SS makes a mention of five-fold dharana (SS, 3.63), on the five elements and the chakras. The same cannot be found in HYP. GS has five dharana techniques discussed in detail and included in the list of mudras as panchadharana.

Dhyana

HYP does not mention dhyana specifically, but it is implied in nadanusandhana, while GS gave a separate chapter called “Dhyana Prakaranam”, and describes three techniques, viz., sthula dhyana, jyothir dhyana, and sukshmadhyana. Sukshma dhyana practiced with shambavi mudra is considered the highest of the three practices.

SS mentions dhyana as part of some techniques but not as a separate technique.

Samadhi

HYP considers nadanusandhana as samadhi and elaborates samadhi in detail. This treatise gives four stages of nadanusandhana, comprising of arambhavastha, ghatavastha, parichayavastha and nishpatthyavastha. It is interesting to see that shambavi mudra and shanmukhi mudra are described in chapter 4, and not with the other dasa mudras. It is important to note that the name ‘Shanmukhi’ is not mentioned but it is just instructed. A number of synonyms for samadhi are given in HYP (chapter 4.3). The nature of Samadhi, the relation between prana and mind are described.

GS clearly gives six techniques of samadhi in the seventh chapter. They are: Dhyana yoga samadhi – achieved by practice of shambavi mudra; Nada yoga samadhi – achieved by the practice of bhramari; Rasananda samadhi - achieved by practice of kechari mudra; Layasiddhi samadhi – achieved by practice of yoni mudra; Bhakti yoga samadhi – achieved by contemplation of deity; and Raja yoga samadhi – achieved by mano moorcha kumbhaka.

SS mentions Raja yoga/Nirvana in Chapter 5 and states Hatha Yoga is purposeless without Raja yoga.

Evaluation

Samadhi, being the final step was mentioned in all the three texts. HYP comprising of only four limbs gave an elaborate description of nadanusandhana or absorption, giving a number of sounds that the yogi can hear from within.

GS, like all the other limbs, dedicated a chapter for samadhi, its types and the means to attain each of them.

SS also explains samadhi, also states that the yogi can hear the mystic sounds or nadas.

Mitahara

The concept of *mitahara* is very integral to Hatha Yoga. HYP discusses *mitahara* (HYP, 1.51) and states the foods that qualify as pathya and apathya.

GS recognizes *mitahara* (GS, 4.16) and lists the foods suitable for a yogi and also those not suitable.

SS mentions the foods that should be taken by a yogi (SS, 3.35) and those to be avoided (SS, 3.34). This text mentions that the yogi should consume food in small quantities at a time and frequently.

Obstacles

HYP provides six obstacles to yoga viz., over eating, exertion, talkativeness, adhering to rules, company of ordinary men, and unsteadiness (HYP, 1.15). GS mentions much travelling, company of women, and fire that are to be avoided by a beginner of yoga practice (GS, 5.26). SS provides a comprehensive list of 23 things to be avoided (SS, 3.33).

Guru

The importance of “guru” is directly mentioned in HYP and SS. Swami Svatmarama begins his discourse by offering salutations to Adiguru Lord Shiva and to his guru, Gorakhnath in HYP. SS declares that the knowledge imparted by the guru through his lips is powerful and useful (SS, 3.11), where as GS is a dialogue between the Guru Gheranda and the disciple Chandakapali, implying the importance of instruction of guru.

The discussion on the role of guru in the three texts indicates the importance and the place, the guru occupies in the course of hatha vidya.

Conclusion

Thus, this paper covered the most important components of hatha yoga in the three classical texts giving the reader an opportunity to go through them simultaneously. In addition to the techniques of hatha yoga, this paper also presented the importance of guru and the diet, as they are intrinsic to yoga practice. Of the three, HYP is the earliest and the most popular text of hatha literature. It can be observed that both HYP and GS focus more on instructing the techniques, where as SS combines some yogic techniques with philosophical teachings. Moreover SS discusses the concept of brahmanda, yogic anatomy, chakras, pratikopasana and mantra japa which is exclusive to this text. We find GS to be the most uncomplicated text for students of yoga, for it clearly mentions 102 techniques, describes them and demarcates its chapters corresponding to its limbs. There are no major differences between the above discussed treatises, as the techniques given by each treatise are more or less, the same but given in a slightly different order. Most importantly, the goal of ‘yoga’ offered by each of these texts is the same Samadhi - Nadanusandhana in HYP, Samadhi in GS, Raja Yoga/Nirvana in SS. This paper has its utility for yoga students and enthusiasts of yoga who wish to develop deeper understanding of the concepts from these three texts. The comparative approach enables one to know the similarities and minor differences between these texts in terms of the period of their compilation, techniques, methodology and other concepts which makes it uncomplicated for students.

Lastly, we sincerely request the practitioners of yoga here and everywhere else, to not to look at these techniques as mere bodily physical acts, but as powerful tools that can lead one to a state of perfection in this embodied condition. The above three texts constantly remind the reader “*kevalam rajayogayah hathavidyopadhishyate*”... which means that only for the purpose of raja yoga, hatha vidya is taught. In this era, when yoga is viewed only as the ability to get into complicated postures, we felt it essential to read and reread our classical texts and their techniques, and the essence with which they are given to us. Yoga is the gift to the world from India, and as fore runners of yoga, let us spread this in its true essence.
