

The Practical Pradipika

by Helen Stutchbury



Yoga's ancient encyclopedia of immortality practices,
distilled for ordinary mortals.

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika is a 600+ year old how-to manual for achieving enlightenment through the practices of Hatha Yoga. It includes postures, dietary habits, breathing techniques, cleansing and other esoteric practices, and describes the lifestyle of a dedicated yogi in that time. Almost nothing is known about the author, Svātmaṛama. One of a small number of ancient guidebooks for yoga that we have to rely on, The Hatha Yoga Pradipika is a fascinating but challenging historical document. Some of its practices are extreme, radical, and dangerous. There is a lot within it that is difficult to understand, or impossible for anyone living in the modern world to realistically achieve. My goal is to present the most practical wisdom and practices from the wisdom of the book, for life in the 21st century.

As I am not a Sanskrit scholar, I'm not able to translate the original work.
My primary resource is the translation by
Brian Dana Akers, published by Yoga Vidya, 2002
because he claims that his translation is accurate and without paraphrase.

I cross referenced with translations by
Pancham Sinh, published by Munshim Manoharlal Publishing, 1997,
Elsy Becherer, with commentary by BKS Iyengar and Hans Ulrich Rieker,
published by the Aquarian Press, 1992
And a compilation translation on www.santosha.com

I did further research for any practice I still could not understand after reading the translations, and my sources include all the major yoga resources that pop up in the first 10 - 20 items on the search page, plus online image and video sources.

It is my hope that this book will be of benefit to you on your path
to your happiest, healthiest life.

This is the work of:

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January, 2020

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Yogis don't steal.

Introduction: Yoga Fixes Everything

Chapter 1, Verse 10

*Hatha is the sanctuary for those suffering every type of pain.
It is the foundation for those practicing every type of yoga.*

It's as simple as this:

In a world with affordable Ipecac at the local drugstore, swallowing 15 yards of wet muslin cloth and pulling it out again to clean my internal organs is not practical.

Cutting the bottom of my tongue so I can reach it up inside my brain and suck the nectar out? Yeah, I'm not going to do that either.

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika was written some 600 years ago, by a fanatic. In the yoga world, this is an "important" ancient book, but that's because there are only a few ancient books. Also not practical thinking. Just because a book exists, doesn't mean it wasn't written by a crazy person.

I don't know this Svatmarama, and neither does anyone else - the book was written 600 hundred years ago. His name means "one who delights in one's Atman." According to the translators, that implies enlightenment, or "the achievement of a state of bliss."

OK, maybe so. But he also could have been just an ordinary extremist. A wide eyed aspirant. A reporter, or a wannabe, observing from the sidelines. The frenzied praise for every technique, the wild claims of immortality, the barrage of every cool metaphor for bliss he's ever heard, this book reads like #ancientinstagram. Svatmarama is over the top, clearly obsessed. But as far as I can tell from the translations, he doesn't refer to himself in the text as having achieved the states of bliss he describes. He just tells us a bunch of things we should do to get there.

Guru or not, Svatmarama's heart seems pure, but he was not practical. Yoga, as he defined it, was extreme in the extreme.

There have always been people who will push to the very outer limits of what the human body can do, just to see what's out there. And we learn a lot from those people; pioneers are brave and bring back great knowledge. But most of us are not going to go where they go. The ancient yogis were not practical. They were radical, and a lot of what they did on the far edges is not useful to people who just want to live a happier, healthier life. I'm not going to do the radical yoga stuff. You are probably not either. We live in the modern world and we do yoga because it helps us cope with it.

In the first chapter of the book, Svātmaṛama warns us against “needless austerities,” but that’s right after he says you have to live in a tiny secluded hut with no heat, no rocks, and no moisture. You can have a small door, but no windows, no rat holes, not too high or too low, or too long. Clean, bug free, plastered with cow dung. You get to have a wall around it, a well, and a garden. Stress free living for every true yogi. 600 years ago.

Oh! And it also has to be in a country that is properly governed.

If a properly governed country can’t be found, and we don’t want to live in a shed, can we still benefit from yoga? Is anything in the book useful for an ordinary person in the 21st century just trying to be healthy and happy?

Lots, actually.

This is a text book of practices, with instructions, for living life as a yogi. One of the world’s few ancient compilations, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika defines and describes how to be a hard core yoga fanatic, in just 4 chapters. Within it is historical information about what yogis ate, how they practiced, lived, and thought. A lot of it is useful today.

Just the metaphors about meditation in chapter 4 offer rich insights into the landscape of the time and place, but this is most useful as an encyclopedia of ancient practices in a very sparse historical record. The full breadth and depth of yoga includes plenty of practical, effective, useful tools to make the human body healthier and the human life happier. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika includes some fantastic advice that fits the bill.

The Practical Pradipika attempts to give it to you in accessible language.

**1620:
A BARE BONES HUT
IN THE WOODS
IS REQUIRED FOR SUCCESS IN YOGA.**

**2020:
CREATE TIME AND SPACE
TO PRACTICE
WITHOUT DISTRACTION.**

I am not a Sanskrit scholar. I used multiple translations and web searches for summaries and opinions. There is a lot of consensus, but also enough variation that being conclusive about some of it is outside of my ability. Even the numbering of the verses differs from translation to translation, and the translations are often difficult to understand. Svātmaṛama wrote in metaphor, in a foreign tongue and culture, 600 years ago. I chose the most consistent translation for each passage, and state it as translated, or paraphrase as necessary. If I quote a verse, it usually comes from the Brian Dana Akers translation of the original Sanskrit.

I change the order of verses when it makes more sense for the practical presentation of the material, otherwise, I’m moving through the book from front to back. Although the author says the postures are a selection of many, and therefore, arbitrary, in general he puts practices in the order he wants them for highest benefit, so I do too.

Chapter 1: The Care and Feeding of a Yogi

BE GRATEFUL.

In the first 9 verses, Svatmarama introduces himself as a yogi, compassionate, and grateful. After saluting God, he writes that he is going to explain the science of Hatha Yoga, and then offers thanks and respect to a long list of teachers and holy beings.

Practically speaking, life is sweeter when gratitude is part of it. So, if you want to be happier, add a gratitude practice to your life. Write 3 things every day, make lists in your prayers, remind yourself what's important regularly, and appreciate the people, places and experiences that make your happy, healthy life possible.

Exercise for Gratitude:

Modern science identifies the following 8 categories for a happy life. As you examine the list, take a moment to write down all the things you are grateful for in each one. Then, give yourself a score between 1 - 10 on your sense of satisfaction in that area. If a weak area shows up, make a list of things you can do to fill it up, and get started.

Physical Wellness - this is your body, and everything related to it: health, diet, personal safety, your home and personal space.

Intellectual Wellness - this is about filling the well, creating a life that balances all your obligations and appreciations. What lights you up?

Emotional Wellness - we all go through times of sadness, loneliness, anger, and fear, but we don't want to get stuck in them. This covers your daily stress levels as well.

Social Wellness - friends, family, partnership, support networks. We all need people.

Community Wellness - is your neighborhood safe? Does it have the kinds of services you and your family need? Are there things to do, places to go? Is it healthy?

Career Wellness - how you spend your days is what this means. The bulk of your day should be satisfying. How's yours?

Financial Wellness - this just means being able to live without constant stress about money. What's enough is subjective. Are you comfortable or working toward it?

Spiritual Wellness - this may include religious or devotional practices for you, but might also just be the sum total of your sense of fulfillment and happiness in life.

We all learn from others. Have you thanked the major teachers in your life so far?

**BE A GOOD PERSON.
TAKE YOUR LIFE SERIOUSLY.**

In verses 11 - 18, we get the basic guidelines, everything we must do just to get started at yoga. It begins with very austere living. Isolated, distraction free, just dedicated practice in a tiny hut in the woods.

Svatmarama insisted the science of yoga be kept top secret, or the yogi will not succeed. I don't know if it's practical or not, but I think if Hatha is the sanctuary for those suffering every type of pain, then it should be broadcast over loudspeakers in the square, and taught in every school and home and hospital. If yoga really works to make a healthier human, I believe keeping it a secret must be a sin. So let's do yoga.

Chapter 1, Verses 15 and 16

*These things make yoga more difficult:
overeating, overexertion, talking too much,
performing needless austerities, socializing, and restlessness.*

He's describing a small group of guys all living in tiny secluded huts in the woods. But that sounds just like a modern human to me: too much food, too much unfulfilling work, too much information, crash diets and fitness fads and negative self talk, social media addictions, and constant anxiety. Whatever it is that yoga can do to fix our walking-dead lives, we need it.

*These things make yoga achievable:
enthusiasm, openness, courage,
knowledge of the truth, determination, and solitude.*

Practically speaking, those things make a happier, healthier life possible too.

Exercise for Obstacles and Benefits

In the 6 obstacles, what specific things can you do in each category to be healthier?

Overeating

Overexertion

Talking too much

Performing Needless Austerities

Socializing

Restlessness

In the 6 benefits, what specific things can you do in each category to be happier?

Enthusiasm

Openness

Courage

Knowledge of the truth

Determination

Solitude

Next, we have 20 practices that make us a better person. While many people practice yoga just for the physical health benefits, the ancients were seeking enlightenment, and they understood that all the yoga in the world won't get you there if you aren't also working on being a good person. These are the rules:

Be non-violent

Be truthful

Do not steal

Exhibit self-restraint

Be merciful and forgiving

Stick with it

Have compassion

Live with honesty and humility

Eat a healthy diet

Be clean and pure of heart

Take responsibility for your actions

Be patient and cheerful

Be charitable and kind

Have faith

Have a contemplation or devotion practice

Continue spiritual study

Develop your intellect and a clean mind

Demonstrate personal modesty

Have dedication to practice

Maintain observance of the rules

These passages are not included in every translation of the book; I include them because I believe profoundly that yoga is ethics. You must be consciously working on kindness to grow spiritually. Svatmarama is telling us to take ourselves and our choices seriously. That's great advice.

Exercise for Ethical Practices and Self-Seriousness

Read through the list and make a note of any that seem to need a little more thought. What do the rules mean to you? Where do you need to work, and how can you bring awareness to developing that practice more fully in your every day life?