

# Enlightenment 101: The yoga tradition offers step-by-step instructions from a lineage of dedicated seekers

by Denise Benitez

I studied the physical aspects of yoga for a long time before I turned toward the philosophical teachings. Even so, the philosophy was somehow seeping into my experience due to the radical and subtle changes I was feeling in the way my mind shifted with the rhythms of the body practices. I became more awake to the world around me, more caring, I ate better, I was more patient, I had a deeper and more consistent sense of emotional stability. And yet I had never heard of the Yoga Sutras in the early years of my yoga practice, nor had I ever thought of investigating the sources of this practice. Yoga was a beloved once a week refuge from the ever chaotic waves of my daily life.

The years passed, I went through many career and personal metamorphoses, but yoga was a constant, as was an ever evolving meditation practice and a deep interest in the mysteries of the human psyche. I was engrossed in the subtleties of Zen Buddhism and somehow I never thought to look for the similarities between the foundations of yoga and the wisdom of Buddhism. One day I picked up a copy of the Yoga Sutras and was blown away by the sophistication of thought that I found. And the striking harmonies between Buddhism and yoga. There was a current of longing in both traditions that resonated deeply with my own experience of yearning to understand and openly experience this phenomenon of human existence. I found, and continue to find, in both practices, voices that seem to speak directly to me with wisdom and experience.

There are many fountains of instruction in the yoga pantheon. One of my favorites, a simple three part primer toward enlightenment is in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, “a traditional source on the relationship between the intuited Divine Reality and the life-process which is always proceeding directly from it.”

First, this word enlightenment. Big word. Kind of scary word. A word that many of us think could never apply to us. When asked what enlightenment is, Pema Chodron, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, said, “Enlightenment is the recognition that everything that is happening is brand new, fresh, only happening this one time. And that you are the only one who is experiencing it exactly this way. And that it is fading away forever as it is happening. So life is precious.”

There are many options for exploring the potential of living more consistently in this recognition Pema speaks about. Here is the method described in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika:

First, when you take your seat for meditation practice, place your mind on the highest possible aspiration. This means placing your mind on a person who inspires you, a teacher, a wise person, a quality, or on a mythical person or creature, an animal or a place in nature that arouses in you the most potent life affirming energy. Even if you feel dull, depressed, or uninspired, fake it and imagine in yourself what it would feel like to be radiantly inspired. Often faking it breaks through the matrix of inertia that limits our efforts.

Second, do breathing practices that physically and psychically bring your inner and outer bodies more into balance and aliveness. A simple practice of alternate nostril breathing every morning can be profoundly transformative. The important thing is to keep your mind placed; that is, you know where your mind is focused as you do the breathing practice. In this way, you are stirring the latent energies in your body into awakesness. By keeping your mind placed on the highest vision for yourself, your loved ones, your community, and your world, you strengthen the energy of transformation for yourself and everyone around you. Many breathing practices, along with sophisticated techniques for awakening and moving energy are described in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. Start slowly and simply with the breathing practices and give each one time to manifest its wisdom in your body.

Third, strengthen your mindfulness muscle, which is very weak for most people. This quality is often translated from Sanskrit as concentration, a great word but one that sometimes makes me furrow my brow. Mindfulness has an open quality to the word itself, and to me it means the ability to see the big picture. You are placing your mind on the most soul expanding vision for yourself; you are consciously and specifically engaging in a breathing practice, and you are watching the whole process from the most wide open sky part of your being, your vast unpreconceived awareness. You are in what Buddhists call Big Mind, which is the place where nothing sticks, everything flows through with equal energy, the inner state is vast and still, even while the physical body is breathing.

Stillness and the movement of life then dance together in a rhythm that is eternal, universal, and familiar. It is like coming home when you forgot you had been away. It is like being embraced by the ocean of life. It is waking up in the middle of an ordinary day and seeing how extraordinary this endless moment really is.