

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# The Notion of *Hatha Yoga: A Tantric Tradition in the Nath Panth* of South Asian Religions and Cults

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### ABSTRACT

The entire universe is created through the union of two opposite energies, and likewise, a human being is a manifestation of the confluence of these two similar forces. One is the energy of pure consciousness, referred to as Purusha or Shiva, residing in the Sahasrara Chakra at the crown of the head. The other is the energy of pure matter, known as Prakriti or Shakti, situated in the Muladhara Chakra in the pelvic region. These two energies exist at two opposite poles of the body—Shiva, representing the masculine tendency, while Shakti, embodying the feminine tendency, is the dynamic energy of material creation. Shiva symbolizes Yoga (union), whereas Shakti symbolizes Bhoga (manifestation). In the Natha tradition, during the practice of Hatha yoga, these masculine and feminine energies merge at a subtle level as the Shiva and Shakti. As for the physical intercourse, at the subtle spiritual level, the inner masculine (Shiva) and feminine (Shakti) unite in Samadhi-yoga, leading to the experience of supreme bliss. This state of supreme bliss is regarded as Moksha or Kaivalya (liberation). This article aims to emphasize that the human body is a living laboratory where, through the practice of Tantra yoga, one can not only uncover the deepest mysteries of the universe but also find profound solutions to all challenges related to human life. Understanding and harnessing this knowledge can help create a life that is harmonious, healthy, prosperous, fearless, compassionate, and deeply peaceful.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is believed that *yoga* first appeared in the earliest periods of human society. Over the millennia, the first belief systems (religious psychology) emerged from the science of *yoga*, which began millions of years ago. According to the *Tantric-yoga* tradition, Lord *Shiva* was the first *Tantric-yogi* (occult master) and *Adi-guru*. Lord *Shiva* infused the fabled *Saptarshi* (Seven Sages) with his own profound and subtle knowledge millions of millions of years ago, close to the *Kantisarovara* in the high *Himalayan* region. This vast study of *yoga* was brought too many regions of the world, including the Middle East, Asia, South America, and North Africa, by the *Rishi* (Sage). Scholars nowadays are renowned for the striking similarities between ancient societies worldwide. However, the *yogic* system discovered it in India. This civilization was built around a core meditation method of life by

*Agastya-rishi*, the only immanent disciple of Lord *Shiva* among the *Saptarshi* who traveled throughout the Indian subcontinent.<sup>[1]</sup>

*Yoga* and the *Tantra* tradition had been handed down from Lord *Shiva*, the first *Tantric-yogi*. A historical account states that he initially taught the *Tantras* to his seven main pupils, among them the Sage *Agastya*, at the holy area of *Kashi* (*Varanasi*) on the Indian subcontinent. It is a compilation of *Shiva's Tantra* teachings that allowed for the writing of the "*Shiva-sutra*." Over time, *Tantra* was extensively covered in a variety of treatises, including the *Siddha* literatures, the *Atharvaveda*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhairava-tantra*, and the *Natha*. The *Tantra* literature is actually too extensive to be simply highlighted. The *Shiva-sutra-tantra* tradition was re-established as a clean "*path of yoga*" in the early medieval period by *Mahayogi*, *Guru Gorakhnath*, who also methodically divided the *Hindu-tantra* into *Hatha-yoga* under the *Natha* lineage and *Pancha-makara-yoga* under the *Siddha* tradition—*Buddhist-Tantrain* the South Asian religion and cults.<sup>[1,2]</sup>

*Hatha-yoga* is an essential teaching of the *Nath-panth*, a widely recognized spiritual order in South Asian religious traditions, and

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is deeply rooted in the mystical traditions of *Tantra*. This article examines the transforming methods, tantric impacts, and religious foundations of *Hatha-yoga* as it originated with *Nath-yogis*. In order to achieve spiritual divinity, it discusses how *Hatha-yoga* emerged as a mystical discipline that integrated breath control, physical restrictions, and *Nadi-shodhan* practices. Using a discussion of tantric literature and classical texts, this study reveals how the *Nath-panth* affected *Hatha-yoga*'s development as a way of closing the gap between mystical insight and physical practice, including gestures and postures.<sup>[1]</sup>

The significance of this study is in its potential to provide light on the complex connections connecting *Tantra* and *Hatha-yoga* traditions, delivering new perspectives on their on-going effect on present *yoga* and meditation practices. In order to define *Hatha-yoga* inside the wider framework of South Asian spirituality, the study presently employs a comparative analysis of classical literature, ethnographic data of *Nath* experts, and a study of the integrated features.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Applying a qualitative method, this study examines the tantric tradition of the *Nath-panth* in South Asian civilizations through historical, textual, and philosophical perspectives. In addition to tantric documents that explicate the esoteric details of the *Nath* cult, initial sources include classical *Hatha-yoga* texts, including the *Hatha-yoga-pradipika*, *Gheranda-samhita*, and *Shiva-samhita*. Secondary sources included research papers, analyses, and indigenous narratives that place *Hatha-yoga*'s contemporary significance and development over time under tantric traditions. Although comparative research shows the impact of *Nath* teachings among wider South Asian religious networks, an analytical method is used to assess the schools' philosophical and cultural elements. In addition, a study with discussions with today's *Nath-yogis* and practitioners provides an inside view of how these traditions transformed and continued. This interdisciplinary approach ensures a comprehensive and advanced understanding of the *Nath-panth*'s tantric foundation and its long-lasting impact on South Asian *yoga* traditions.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

The basic structure of *yoga* is *tantric* i.e. *Tantra* is pure path of *yoga*, in which body is considered as a *tantra* (system). In addition, physical system (*Sharir-tantra*) includes anatomy of body and astral system (*Nadi-tantra*) including *shat-chakra* (seven plexuses). By practicing the *Hatha-yoga*'s eight steps, the '*Sakti*' – *kundalini* energy in *Muladhara-chakra*, is up-warded to passing all six *Chakras* via *Sushuman-nadi* and meets to '*Shiva*' on top *Sahasrara-chakra*. So the meeting of *Shiva* and *Sakti* is the ultimate objective of *yoga* and referred as *Moksha* or *Kaivalya*.<sup>[3]</sup> Thus the mutual interaction of *Kula* and *Akula Tantra* is known as *yoga* in *Tantra* tradition. Lord *Shiva* described one hundred and twelve methods in *Shiva-sutra* and *Vijnana-bhairava-tantra* for achieving the *Moksha*.<sup>[4]</sup>

### 3.1. Tradition of *Kaula-panth*

The *Kaula-jnana-nirdaya* is an ancient source of *Shaiva-tantra-yoga*, attributed to *Matsyendranath*, who is considered the founder of the *Kaula-panth*. In the early medieval period, *Kamakhya* was the primary centre for *Matsyendranath*'s tantric practices, which were later transferred to *Nepal* by *Guru Gorakhnath*. Followers of the *Nath-panth* adhered to the *Kaula* branch of both the *Shaiva* and *Shakta* traditions. The *Kaula* tradition is classified into three subgroups.<sup>[4,5]</sup>

- Followers of *Patanjali-yoga*.
- Followers of *Tantric-yoga*.
- Followers of *Buddhist and Jain* cults.

The *tantric* practice of the *Kaula* cult is based on the principles of *Kula* and *Akula*, which represent '*Ku*' (the *Kundalini* energy residing in the *Muladhara-chakra*) and '*La*' (the involvement in the activity of the *Muladhara*). *Akula* signifies one who is not engaged in *Kundalini* energy and sexual activity (*Kama*) but rather is situated in the *Sahasrara-chakra*.

*Kaula-yoga* practice operates at two extreme and opposite ends: first, *Shakti*, and second, *Shiva*, wherein *Shakti* is the primal energy of *Kundalini*, stored in the *Muladhara-chakra* as sexual energy (*Kama*), which creates the nature.<sup>[5]</sup> The *Kaula* doctrine acknowledges both *yoga* and *Bhoga* (*yoga-bhoga-Sahacharya* principle).

The *tantric* practices of *Kaulachara* are classified into two types:

#### 3.1.1. *Ardra Kaulachara*

This *tantric* practice is based on *Pancha-makaras* (*Matsya*, *Mamsa*, *Madya*, *Mudra*, and *Maithuna*).

#### 3.1.2. *Shushka Kaulachara*

This *tantric* practice is avoided by *Pancha-makaras*.<sup>[5]</sup>

It is regarded as the feminine aspect as *Sakti*. Thus the *Shakti* desires to unite with *Shiva*, and in this union, the universe or nature is born. Eventually, *Shakti* merges into *Shiva*, leading to *Moksha* (liberation). Thus, the *Kaula-yoga* is the practice of uniting *Shakti* with *Shiva* through the *Sushumna-nadi*, signifying the union of *Kula* with *Akula*, leading to a transcendental state (*Trigunatita*) and ultimately *Kaivalya* (absolute liberation). A practitioner who completes this journey is called a *Kaula-yogi*. In other words, a *Kaula-yogi* transitions from *Kula* to *Akula*, from *Shakti* to *Shiva*, from *Raja* (feminine element) to *Shukra* (masculine element), from *Prakriti* to *Purusha* and from *Muladhara* to *Sahasrara*, among ethical disciplines, *Kaulachara* is regarded as the super path.<sup>[5,6]</sup>

### 3.2. Tradition of *Nath-panth*

The tradition of *Nath-panth* was founded by the great *yogi Guru Gorakhnath*, inspired by *Matsyendranath*'s *Kaula* cult. The *Nath-panth* emphasizes the union of two cosmic energies: *Purusha* (pure masculine consciousness in *Sahasrara-chakra*, led by *Shiva*) and *Prakriti* (pure feminine material energy in *Muladhara-chakra*, led by *Shakti*). The background of the *Nath* tradition is based on the union of these two opposing energies. In *Nath-panth*'s *yoga*, this union is achieved through *Hatha-yoga-tantra*, wherein *Shakti* (*Prakriti* or pure matter in the feminine form) merges with *Shiva* (*Purusha* or pure consciousness in the masculine form), liberating the practitioner (*Sadhaka*) from entire *karma*-bondages and granting *Kaivalya* (absolute liberation) [Figure 1].<sup>[7]</sup>

In addition to major centres of *Tantra* in India, they were found to be fallow

#### 3.2.1. *Kashmiri Shaivacult*

*Kashmir* has been an ancient centre of *Tantra*, where two significant texts—*Bhairava-bhairavi-samvada* and *Vijnana-bhairava-tantra*—were composed.

#### 3.2.2. *Nath Panthi Shaivacult*

*Guru Gorakhnath*'s *nath* cult was influenced by the ancient *Kashmiri-shaiva* cult. The *Nath-yoga* system integrates *Shaiva-tantra*, *Shakta-tantra*, and *Kashmiri-shaivism*, making it a *Trika-mata* tradition.

Unlike *Patanjali-yoga*, *Buddhism*, and *Jain Tantra*, the *Nath-panth* is an independent tantric system. Its yogic discipline is based on the *Shiva* and *Shakti Tantra* and the practice of *Hatha-yoga*, involving two forces: *Shiva* (*Bhairava*) and *Shakti* (*Bhairavi*, *Uma*, or *Parvati*).

The *Shaiva* tradition is associated with *yoga* or *Hatha-yoga*, while the *Shakta* tradition is linked to *tantric practices*. *Shiva* represents *yoga*, whereas *Shakti* represents *Bhoga*. The union of *yoga* and *Bhoga* in tantric practice signifies the merger of *Shiva* and *Shakti*, which is ultimately the fusion of *Raja* and *Retas*, or the *Kundalini* energy of *Muladhara* with the cosmic energy of *Sahasrara-chakra*, leading to *Moksha* and *Kaivalya*.<sup>[7]</sup>

According to the *Goraksha-upanis had*, the ultimate truth of *Vedanta* philosophy may be *Advaita* (non-duality), but the truth of the *Nath-panth* is superior to all cults, even *Advaita*. It surpasses both form and formlessness. In *Nath* philosophy, *Shiva* is referred to as *Adinath*. The *Nath* tradition acknowledges four types of *Nathas*: *Nirakara-nath*, *Sakara-nath*, *Bhairava-nath*, and *Bhairavi-nath*. The tradition describes two kinds of creation: *Vada-rupa-srishti* and *Bindu-rupa-srishti*.<sup>[7]</sup>

Historically, five major centres of *tantric* practice in medieval India included *Kamakhya*, *Kashi*, *Ujjain*, *Mathura*, and *Takshashila*. There were two primary *tantric* traditions:

### 3.2.3. *Shaiva tradition*

Focused on *yoga* practice, particularly the *Kapalika* and *Kalamukha* sects.

### 3.2.4. *Shakta tradition*

Focused on *tantric* practice, mainly involving *Bhogini* and *Bhairavi* sects.<sup>[7,8]</sup>

## 3.3. Variants and Kinds of *Hatha-yoga*

The classical texts on *Hatha-yoga* mention two main types: *Shadang* (six-fold) and *Ashtanga* (eight-fold) *Hatha-yoga*. So the concept of *Shadang-yoga* is found in texts such as *Maitrayani*, *Shvetashvatara*, *Dhyana-bindu*, *Yoga-chudamani*, *Amritanada*, *Kshurika*, *Upanishads*, and *Goraksha-shataka*. And *Ashtanga Hatha-yoga* (including *Mudra* and *Bandha*) is mentioned in texts such as *Hatha-yoga-pradipika*, *Siddha-siddhanta-paddhati*, *Goraksha -samhita*, *Shiva-samhita*, and *Gheranda-samhita*.

According to *Yoga-svarodaya*, *Hatha-yoga* is of two types:

### 3.3.1. *Ashtanga Hatha-yoga*

Consisting of *Asana* (postures), *Pranayama* (breath control), and *Shatkarma* (six purification techniques of *Nadis* including *Neti*, *Dhauti*, *Nauli*, *Basti*, *Kapalabhati*, and *Trataka*).

### 3.3.2. *Nasagra Dhyana*

A meditative technique involving concentration on the tip of the nose while visualizing sunlight in the sky and meditating upon the colours white, red, yellow, and black.<sup>[7]</sup>

Both of these approaches are categorized under *Hatha-yoga*, as they follow the *Siddha-sevita-marga* (the path adopted by accomplished sages). In contrast, *Patanjali-yoga-sutras* describe *Ashtanga Raja-yoga*, which includes *Yama* and *Niyama* and essential six-fold disciplines. However, *Goraksha-shataka* is unique in presenting *Shadang-yoga* without *Yama* and *Niyama*. Additionally, the *Yoga-svarodaya* is the only text that describes *Ashtanga Hatha-yoga* as a system integrating *Asana* and *Pranayama* along with *Shatkarma* (six cleansing techniques of *Nadis*).<sup>[9]</sup>

## 3.4. Traditional Variant of *Hatha-yoga*

Traditionally, *Hatha-yoga* practitioners (*Hatha-yogis*) are classified into three categories as follows:

### 3.4.1. *Patanjali-ashtanga-raja-yoga*

Before *Guru Gorakhnath*, *Hatha-yoga* was understood in the framework of *Patanjali-ashtanga-raja-yoga*, which included eight-fold discipline including *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Asana*, *Pranayama*, *Pratyahara*, *Dharana*, *Dhyana*, and *Samadhi*. This perspective is also referenced by *Sage Markandeya*.

### 3.4.2. *Shadang-hatha-yoga*

*Guru Gorakhnath* is credited with formulating *Shadang-yoga*, which is discussed in texts such as *Goraksha-shataka* and prior to *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*. Unlike *Raja-yoga*, it does not incorporate *Yama* and *Niyama*.

### 3.4.3. *Later Ashtanga-hatha-yoga*

A long period after *Guru Gorakhnath* in the later medieval period during the 14<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> C.E., a modified formulation of *Ashtanga-hatha-yoga*, incorporating *Mudra* and *Bandha* as a basic six-fold discipline, emerged to remove the *Yama* and *Niyama*. This is elaborated in texts like *Hatha-yoga-pradipika*, *Siddha-siddhanta-paddhati*, *Goraksha-samhita*, *Shiva-samhita*, and *Gheranda-samhita*. This later development of *Ashtanga-hatha-yoga* has become widely practiced today.<sup>[7-9]</sup>

## 3.5. *Hatha-yoga* versus *Raja-yoga*

- *Patanjali-raja-yoga* controls *Prana* and *Bindu* through sensory discipline, whereas *Hatha-yoga* controls the mind and *Prana* through *Bindu*'s (sperm or ovum) uplifting.
- *Raja-yoga* is based on *Indriya-nigraha* (sensory discipline), whereas *Hatha-yoga* emphasizes *Nadi-shuddhi-karana* (purification of energy channels or mind).
- Both ultimately aim for *Kaivalya* (liberation) through the merger of *Shakti* and *Shiva* directly or indirectly.<sup>[7]</sup>

Thus, *Hatha-yoga* serves as a powerful means to achieve spiritual enlightenment through the harmonization of vital energies within the body.

## 3.6. Mechanism of *Hatha-yoga*

- *Muladhara-chakra* is a triangular, subtle, and material energy centre (*Agni-kendra*), where the elemental feminine force of nature (*Shakti*) is stored in a dormant state. It resides in a coiled form, like a serpent (*Kundalini*), wrapped around three to eight energy centres (*Chakras*).
- There are the three essential elements of *Hatha-yoga*, considered *Bindu* (semen or ovum), *Vayu* (*Pranic-vayu*), and *Manas* (mind or empirical consciousness). In *Hatha-yoga*, mastery is achieved by elevating *Bindu* upwards, thereby gaining control over *Prana* and *Manas*.
- *Nadi Purification*—Regular practice of *Hatha-yoga* purifies the *Nadis* (cleaning the mind or subtle energy channel). The *Sushumna-nadi* facilitates the ascension of *Bindu* (semen or ovum) from *Muladhara* to *Sahasrara-chakra*, symbolizing the union of *Shiva* and *Shakti*. In *Patanjali-raja-yoga*, this union is described as the merging of *Raja* (feminine element) and *Retas* (masculine elements). Similarly, in *Hatha-yoga*, it is referred to as the fusion of *Shakti* and *Shiva*.

It is said the objective of *Hatha-yoga* is to attain *yogic* perfection through rigorous and forceful disciplined practice.<sup>[8,9]</sup>



### 3.7. Hatha-yoga in Nath-panth

According to the Tantra tradition, the term 'Hatha' in which 'Ha' represents the sun (*Pingala-nadi*) and 'Tha' represents the moon (*Ida-nadi*). Inwardly, 'Hatha' means the union of solar and lunar energies. The moon governs *Ida-nadi*, the inhaling breath—*Apana-vayu*, while the sun governs *Pingala-nadi*, controlling the exhaling breath—*Prana-vayu*. To block pranic energy into both *Ida* and *Pingala*, move them into the *Sushumna-nadi*, called *Hatha-yoga*.<sup>[7]</sup>

*Hatha-yoga* is basically based on the *Nadis* purification tantric technique using multi-mudras and multi-bandhas, adding other *Shadang* (six-fold) disciplines. Its roots are traced initially in *Buddhist-vajrayana-tantra*, and then introduced in another school of occultist cults later. In addition, *Siddha-siddhanta-paddhati* defines *Hatha-yoga* as follow.<sup>[9]</sup>

According to the *Vajrayana-tantra* text '*Guhyasamaja*', if traditional *Buddhist* tantric methods do not lead to *Bodhi* (enlightenment), the practitioner should resort to *Hatha-yoga*." In *Vajrayana-tantra*, *Hatha-yoga* is called providing *Hatha-siddhi-yoga*.<sup>[10]</sup>

### 4. CONCLUSION

*Nath* tradition represent profound spiritual systems deeply rooted in *Shaiva* and *Shakta Tantra* with integration of *yoga* and *Bhoga*, emphasizing the union of *Shakti* (pure matter) and *Shiva* (pure consciousness) as a means to attain *Kaivalya* (liberation) by channelling *Kundalini* energy through the *Sushumna-nadi*. Similarly, the *Nath* tradition, established by *Guru Gorakhnath*, refines this spiritual process through *Hatha-yoga*, which purifies the *Nadis* and harmonizes *Prana*, leading to self-realization. The significance of these traditions extends beyond historical and philosophical discourse. *Hatha-yoga*, as emphasized in the *Nath* tradition, serves as a vital link between the body, mind, and consciousness. The synthesis of *Shaiva*, *Shakta*, and *Vajrayana* influences further enriches these traditions, making them integral to understanding tantric and *yogic* disciplines. Understanding and harnessing *Nath* philosophy can help us to create a life that is beautiful, healthy, prosperous, fearless, compassionate, and peaceful.

Future research on *Nath* tradition's *yoga* can explore their relevance in modern mental health, stress management, and holistic healing. Investigating the physiological and neurological effects of *Hatha-yoga-tantra* through scientific studies can offer deeper insights into the mind-body connection. Comparative studies between traditional *yogic* disciplines and modern psychotherapy could reveal new therapeutic applications. Additionally, interdisciplinary research integrating quantum consciousness and *yogic* philosophy may bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary science, expanding the practical and spiritual dimensions of these traditions globally.

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**Figure 1:** How the two astral energy forces, masculine (Shiva) and feminine (Shakti), wherein Shakti in the sacral plexus indicates creating material force as a Bhoga or Kama (e.g., semen or ovum, Raja) and Shiva in the crown plexus indicates the creator force and pure inactive consciousness as a yoga (e.g., Bindu or Retas). So, during the Tantra-Samadhi through internal Yoga and Bhoga, these two opposite forces merge in a state called the meeting of Shiva and Shakti that is the ultimate goal known as Kaivalya or Moksha