

THREE COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HATHA YOGA

By Richard Rosen

I just happened upon a comment on an Internet website that compels me to write this note. To paraphrase: Hatha Yoga is a "preparation" for the "true" yoga, Raja Yoga or Ashtanga Yoga. I won't even get into the misconceptions about Patanjali and Raja Yoga in this seemingly innocuous statement, except to say that for a guy who only collected and collated a bunch of notes about the extant practices of the Yoga of his time he sure gets a lot of credit. Please remember that by themselves the sutras are nothing more than a bare bones outline of a system, and that more attention should be paid to the contributions of Vyasa and Vachaspati Mishra. Who are they? I thought so.

MISCONCEPTION #1. Hatha Yoga is a preparation for Raja Yoga.

This misconception stems from a misreading of the introductory verses of the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. The author, Svātmaṛama, says that Hatha is a "staircase" or "ladder" to the heights of Raja Yoga. Yes, I know, Raja Yoga is usually applied to Patanjali's teaching, BUT NOT HERE. Please refer to 4.4 in the text, where Raja Yoga is plainly used as a synonym for samadhi, the ultimate goal of Hatha. HATHA YOGA HAS NOTHING WHATSOEVER TO DO WITH PATANJALI'S RAJA YOGA. Can we stop that now?

MISCONCEPTION #2. Hatha Yoga is a purely physical practice.

For the seeds of this misconception we need to go all the way to Swami Vivekananda (who by the way was a self-appointed swami) and his little book on Raja Yoga. He writes in there that Hatha "deals entirely with the physical body" and doesn't "lead to much spiritual growth" (p. 23). Ouch. Hatha Yoga BEGINS with the body to prepare it for practices that lead to the "identity" of the jivatman, the "embodied self," and the paramatman, the "great self" (HYP 4.7). How much more spiritual do you want to get?

MISCONCEPTION #3. The supernormal powers generated by Hatha Yoga are distractions and should be ignored.

In response to this I quote first from David Lorenzen, *The Kapalikas and Kalamukhas* (93-94): In spite of the abundant textual references to various siddhis in classical Yoga texts, many modern Indian scholars, and like-minded western ones as well, have seized on a single sutra of Patanjali (iii. 37) to prove that magical powers were

regarded as subsidiary, even a hindrance, to final liberation and consequently not worthy of concentrated pursuit. This attitude may have been operative in Vedantic and Buddhist circles and is now popular among practitioners imbued with the spirit of the Hindu Renaissance, but it was not the view of Patanjali and certainly not the view of mediaeval exponents of Hatha Yoga.

In regard to Yoga Sutra 3.37, Arthur Koestler in *The Lotus and the Robot* writes (110-11):

[This sutra] is the only warning in the entire text; and it only refers to certain psychic powers which are mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, whereas the powers which are listed after the warning ... are held out as legitimate rewards to those who master the higher forms of contemplation. As for the later sources, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and its companion texts, the ... siddhis are promised on practically every page ... All disclaimers notwithstanding, the siddhis are an integral part of Yoga.