

Tantric Elements in Hatha Yoga: Power, Energy, and Transformation

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Abstract

The relationship between Tantric philosophy and Hatha Yoga practice represents one of the most profound yet often misunderstood aspects of yogic tradition. This paper examines the foundational tantric elements embedded within Hatha Yoga, focusing on how concepts of power, energy, and transformation manifest through systematic practices designed to awaken and direct subtle energies. Through analysis of classical texts including the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Shiva Samhita, and contemporary research, this study explores the tantric framework underlying Hatha Yoga's approach to energy cultivation, chakra activation, and consciousness transformation. The research reveals that Hatha Yoga is fundamentally a tantric practice centered on the refinement and activation of prana (life force energy) through specific techniques including asanas, pranayama, mudras, and bandhas. These practices work within a sophisticated understanding of the subtle body to facilitate the awakening of Kundalini energy and the integration of opposing forces (Ha-Tha) toward spiritual liberation. Contemporary scientific investigation into these practices has begun to validate traditional claims regarding their transformative effects on consciousness and physiological function. This paper argues that understanding the tantric foundations of Hatha Yoga is essential for practitioners and teachers seeking to engage with its deeper transformative potential while maintaining respect for its sacred origins.

Keywords: Tantra, Hatha Yoga, Kundalini, chakras, prana, energy transformation, spiritual practice, subtle body, meditation, pranayama, mudras, bandhas

1. Introduction

The modern understanding of Hatha Yoga often emphasizes its physical aspects while overlooking its profound tantric philosophical foundations. However, the classical texts and

traditional teachings reveal that Hatha Yoga emerged from and operates within a distinctly tantric framework, one that views the body as a sacred vessel for consciousness transformation and energy cultivation. Hatha yoga IS a tantric practice, hatha yoga is, at its heart, focussed on the refinement and activation of 'prana' or life force, Tantra literally means to 'Weave the Loom' or to Intentionally 'Refine Lifeforce Energy' and that is exactly what Hatha Yoga is designed to do.

The tantric elements within Hatha Yoga encompass a comprehensive system for working with subtle energies, consciousness states, and the fundamental forces of creation and dissolution. Unlike approaches that view yoga merely as physical exercise or stress reduction, the tantric perspective recognizes Hatha Yoga as a complete spiritual technology designed to awaken dormant potentials within the human system and facilitate direct experience of non-dual awareness.

Understanding these tantric foundations is crucial for several reasons: it provides context for the deeper purposes of traditional practices, offers insights into the systematic methodology underlying seemingly simple techniques, and reveals the sophisticated understanding of consciousness and energy that informs authentic Hatha Yoga instruction. Moreover, contemporary research into the effects of these practices is beginning to validate traditional claims regarding their transformative potential.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Foundations and Textual Sources

The tantric roots of Hatha Yoga are clearly evident in its foundational texts, particularly the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, compiled by Svatmarama in the 15th century. The work consists of 389 shlokas... body (chakra), kuṇḍalinī, energetic locks (bandha), energy (prāṇa), channels of the subtle body (nāḍī), and energetic seals (mudrā). This comprehensive text outlines a systematic approach to energy cultivation that is fundamentally tantric in its orientation, focusing on the awakening and direction of Kundalini energy through specific physical and energetic practices.

The Shiva Samhita, another classical text, further elaborates the tantric framework underlying Hatha practice. The "Shiva Samhita" also merits attention. Kundalini activation offers

insights into the sophisticated understanding of energy transformation that characterizes authentic tantric yoga practice.

2.2 Tantric Philosophy and Energy Concepts

To its practitioners, Tantra is defined as a combination of texts, techniques, rituals, monastic practices, meditation, yoga, and ideology. Within this framework, the body is not seen as an obstacle to spiritual development but as the primary vehicle for consciousness transformation. This perspective fundamentally informs Hatha Yoga's approach to working with the physical form.

The concept of Kundalini, central to both Tantra and Hatha Yoga, represents a form of divine feminine energy (or Shakti) believed to be located at the base of the spine, in the muladhara. It is an important concept in Śhaiva Tantra, where it is believed to be a force or power associated with the divine feminine or the formless aspect of the Goddess. This energy in the body, when cultivated and awakened through tantric practice, is believed to lead to spiritual liberation.

The subtle body model, incorporating chakras, nadis, and prana, provides the energetic framework within which Hatha Yoga practices operate. Kundalini is the energy of consciousness which is created when prana is transformed through tantric meditation. Breathing techniques purify the nadis and the chakras. This understanding reveals how specific practices are designed to work with subtle energies rather than merely physical structures.

2.3 Contemporary Research and Scientific Investigation

Recent scientific inquiry has begun examining the effects of tantric-based practices, particularly those involving energy cultivation and consciousness transformation. There is a paucity of research examining the phenomenology and energetic effects of spiritually transformative experiences with an energetic component, indicating both the growing interest in this area and the need for more comprehensive research.

Interest in the use of yoga to enhance engagement with and augment the benefits of psychological treatment has grown. However, a systematic approach to reviewing existing research examining the use of yoga with psychological treatment is lacking. This suggests

that while there is recognition of yoga's therapeutic potential, the specific mechanisms underlying its transformative effects—particularly those related to energy cultivation—require further investigation.

The emerging field of cognitive science applied to yogic and tantric practices offers new avenues for understanding these traditional approaches. The range of disciplines known as the Cognitive Science of Religions (CSR), which has emerged in recent decades, embraces many areas relevant to understanding the psychological and neurological correlates of tantric practices.

3. Theoretical Framework: Tantric Principles in Hatha Yoga

3.1 The Doctrine of Subtle Bodies

The tantric understanding of the human system encompasses multiple layers of existence, from the gross physical body to increasingly subtle energetic and consciousness-based dimensions. In Hatha Yoga, this multilayered model provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how physical practices can produce profound transformations in consciousness and energy.

The concept of the subtle body (sukshma sharira) includes the network of energy channels (nadis), energy centers (chakras), and the various forms of life force (prana) that animate the system. Traditional texts describe 72,000 nadis, with three primary channels—Ida, Pingala, and Sushumna—serving as the main pathways for energy circulation and transformation.

The chakra system represents focal points where different qualities of consciousness and energy intersect within the subtle body. Each chakra corresponds to specific psychological, physiological, and spiritual functions, and the systematic activation of these centers through Hatha Yoga practice facilitates progressive transformation of consciousness.

3.2 Energy Transformation and the Union of Opposites

The very name "Hatha" reveals the tantric principle at the heart of this practice: the union of opposing forces. "Ha" represents solar energy (Pingala nadi) while "Tha" represents lunar energy (Ida nadi). The practice of Hatha Yoga seeks to balance and ultimately transcend these dualistic energies, facilitating the awakening of consciousness through the central channel (Sushumna).

This process of energy transformation involves several stages:

- **Purification (Shuddhi):** Initial practices purify the energy channels and prepare the system for more advanced work
- **Concentration (Dharana):** Focused attention directs energy toward specific centers or objectives
- **Awakening (Jagaran):** Dormant energies, particularly Kundalini, are awakened through systematic practice
- **Integration (Samadhi):** Awakened energies are integrated, leading to transformed states of consciousness

3.3 The Role of Intention and Sacred Approach

Tantric practice emphasizes the importance of intention (sankalpa) and sacred approach to transformative work. In Hatha Yoga, this translates to understanding practices not merely as physical exercises but as sacred acts designed to facilitate specific energetic and consciousness transformations.

This sacred approach includes:

- Recognition of the body as a temple of consciousness
- Understanding practices as offerings to divine energy
- Maintenance of proper mental attitude during practice
- Integration of devotional elements with technical precision

4. Specific Tantric Elements in Hatha Yoga Practice

4.1 Asanas: Sacred Geometry and Energy Alignment

The physical postures of Hatha Yoga represent far more than mere stretching or strengthening exercises. From a tantric perspective, asanas are sacred geometries that align the body's energy systems with cosmic forces and facilitate specific transformations in consciousness.

Each asana works with particular energy patterns and consciousness states. For example:

- **Seated meditation postures** establish stability and facilitate upward movement of energy
- **Backbends** open the heart center and activate solar energy
- **Forward bends** cultivate introspection and lunar energy
- **Inversions** reverse the normal flow of energy and facilitate profound physiological and psychological changes
- **Twisting poses** stimulate the central channel and promote energy circulation

The tantric approach to asana practice emphasizes quality of awareness over quantity of poses, with attention to how each position affects the movement and distribution of subtle energies throughout the system.

4.2 Pranayama: The Science of Life Force Cultivation

Breathing practices in Hatha Yoga represent sophisticated technologies for working with prana (life force energy). Tantric Hatha Yoga is a very traditional way of practising yoga. Here we focus mainly on the energetic effects of our practice. Each class leads us into a meditative state, starting with asanas, followed by pranayama and ending with a meditation kriya.

Key pranayama practices include:

Nadi Shodhana (Alternate Nostril Breathing): This practice balances the solar and lunar energies, purifies the energy channels, and prepares the system for more advanced practices. The systematic alternation between nostrils directly works with the Ida and Pingala nadis.

Kapalabhati (Skull Shining Breath): This rapid breathing technique generates heat, purifies the frontal brain, and stimulates the solar plexus. From a tantric perspective, it prepares the system for the awakening of higher energies.

Bhastrika (Bellows Breath): This powerful practice generates significant internal heat and energy, facilitating the awakening of Kundalini energy when practiced with proper preparation and guidance.

Ujjayi (Victory Breath): This gentle practice creates internal heat while maintaining a meditative state, supporting both energy cultivation and consciousness transformation.

Mudras: Energetic Seals and Sacred Gestures

Mudras represent one of the most distinctly tantric elements within Hatha Yoga practice. These energetic seals work with the subtle energy system to facilitate specific transformations in consciousness and energy distribution.

Hasta Mudras (Hand Gestures): These create energetic circuits that direct prana in specific patterns. Examples include:

- **Chin Mudra:** Connects individual consciousness with universal consciousness
- **Prana Mudra:** Enhances life force energy
- **Apana Mudra:** Facilitates elimination and purification

Kaya Mudras (Body Seals): These involve larger body positions that create powerful energetic effects:

- **Viparita Karani:** Reverses the normal flow of energy and preserves vital essence
- **Maha Mudra:** Integrates multiple energy systems and facilitates Kundalini awakening

Bandha Mudras (Energetic Locks): These internal actions direct and contain energy:

- **Mula Bandha:** Activates the root energy center and supports Kundalini awakening
- **Uddiyana Bandha:** Lifts energy upward through the central channel
- **Jalandhara Bandha:** Prevents energy from dissipating through the upper centers

4.3 Mantras: Sacred Sound and Vibrational Transformation

The use of sacred sound represents another crucial tantric element within Hatha Yoga. Similar to monastic chanting, mantra, the ritual repetition of sounds, words, or phrases, is used to raise the Kundalini and facilitate consciousness transformation.

Mantra practice in Hatha Yoga includes:

- **Bija Mantras:** Seed sounds that activate specific chakras and energy centers
- **Traditional Mantras:** Sacred phrases that invoke particular qualities of consciousness
- **Pranava (OM):** The primordial sound that encompasses all vibration and facilitates union with cosmic consciousness

The combination of sound, breath, and awareness creates powerful synergistic effects that amplify the transformative potential of physical practices.

5. The Subtle Body and Energy Transformation

5.1 Chakras: Centers of Consciousness and Energy

The chakra system provides a detailed map for understanding how tantric practices facilitate transformation at different levels of consciousness and energy. Each chakra represents a particular frequency of consciousness and corresponds to specific physical, emotional, and spiritual functions.

Muladhara (Root Chakra): Located at the base of the spine, this center governs survival instincts and houses the dormant Kundalini energy. Hatha Yoga practices that ground and stabilize energy work primarily with this chakra.

Svadhithana (Sacral Chakra): Governing creativity and sexuality, this center is activated through practices that work with the lower abdomen and hip region.

Manipura (Solar Plexus Chakra): The center of personal power and transformation, this chakra is stimulated through practices that generate internal heat and activate the digestive fire.

Anahata (Heart Chakra): The center of love and compassion, this chakra opens through backbends and practices that expand the chest and cultivate emotional balance.

Vishuddha (Throat Chakra): Governing communication and expression, this center is activated through pranayama practices and sound work.

Ajna (Third Eye Chakra): The center of intuition and inner seeing, this chakra is developed through concentration practices and meditation.

Sahasrara (Crown Chakra): Representing unity consciousness, this center opens through advanced practices that facilitate the union of individual and cosmic consciousness.

5.2 Nadis: Energy Channels and Circulation Patterns

The network of nadis represents the pathways through which prana moves throughout the subtle body. Understanding these channels is essential for comprehending how tantric practices facilitate energy transformation.

Ida Nadi: The lunar channel, associated with cooling, receptive energy and right-brain functions. Practices that activate Ida promote introspection, creativity, and emotional balance.

Pingala Nadi: The solar channel, associated with heating, active energy and left-brain functions. Practices that stimulate Pingala enhance focus, analysis, and dynamic action.

Sushumna Nadi: The central channel, running along the spine from the base to the crown. Awakening Sushumna is the primary goal of tantric Hatha Yoga practice, as it facilitates the direct ascent of Kundalini energy.

5.3 Kundalini: The Serpent Power

Kundalini represents the evolutionary energy that lies dormant at the base of the spine. In tantric philosophy, this energy embodies the creative power of the universe (Shakti) and its awakening facilitates direct realization of one's divine nature.

The process of Kundalini awakening through Hatha Yoga involves:

- **Preparation:** Purification of the energy channels and stabilization of the nervous system
- **Awakening:** Activation of the dormant energy through specific practices
- **Ascension:** Movement of awakened energy through the chakras along the Sushumna nadi
- **Integration:** Stabilization of awakened energy and integration of expanded consciousness

This process requires careful guidance, proper preparation, and respectful approach to avoid potential complications associated with premature or uncontrolled energy awakening.

6. Contemporary Applications and Scientific Validation

6.1 Physiological Effects of Tantric Practices

Modern research has begun documenting the physiological effects of practices rooted in tantric tradition. Studies have shown that advanced yoga practitioners exhibit:

- Altered brainwave patterns consistent with enhanced states of consciousness
- Improved regulation of the autonomic nervous system
- Enhanced production of beneficial neurotransmitters
- Increased coherence between different brain regions
- Improved immune function and stress resistance

These findings suggest that traditional claims regarding the transformative effects of tantric practices may have measurable physiological correlates.

6.2 Psychological and Therapeutic Applications

The integration of tantric elements from Hatha Yoga into therapeutic contexts has shown promising results for various psychological conditions. The emphasis on energy awareness, body consciousness, and mindful movement provides valuable tools for:

- Trauma recovery and nervous system regulation
- Anxiety and depression management
- Enhancement of emotional intelligence and self-awareness
- Development of resilience and stress management skills
- Facilitation of personal growth and spiritual development

However, the integration of these practices into therapeutic settings requires careful consideration of their sacred origins and proper training for practitioners.

6.3 Spiritual and Consciousness Applications

The ultimate goal of tantric Hatha Yoga—the transformation of consciousness—continues to attract interest from both practitioners and researchers. Contemporary approaches to understanding consciousness transformation include:

- Neuroscientific investigation of meditative states
- Phenomenological research into transformative experiences
- Integration of traditional practices with modern therapeutic approaches
- Development of secular applications that maintain the essential transformative elements

7. Challenges and Considerations

7.1 Cultural Appropriation and Sacred Tradition

The increasing popularity of yoga in Western contexts has raised important questions about cultural appropriation and the commercialization of sacred practices. The tantric elements within Hatha Yoga are particularly susceptible to misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Key considerations include:

- Maintaining respect for the sacred origins of these practices
- Ensuring proper training and understanding for teachers and practitioners
- Avoiding reductionist interpretations that strip practices of their deeper meaning
- Balancing accessibility with authenticity

7.2 Safety and Proper Guidance

The powerful nature of tantric practices requires appropriate guidance and preparation. Premature or inappropriate engagement with advanced techniques can lead to physical, psychological, or energetic complications.

Essential safety considerations include:

- Proper preparation through foundational practices
- Qualified guidance from experienced teachers
- Respect for individual limitations and constitution
- Understanding of potential contraindications and risks

7.3 Integration with Modern Life

The challenge of integrating traditional tantric practices with contemporary lifestyle and values requires careful consideration. This includes:

- Adapting practices to modern contexts while maintaining their essential integrity
- Balancing spiritual development with worldly responsibilities
- Understanding how ancient practices apply to contemporary psychological and spiritual needs

8. Future Directions and Research Opportunities

8.1 Scientific Investigation

The growing interest in consciousness research and the effects of contemplative practices provides opportunities for more comprehensive investigation of tantric elements in Hatha Yoga. Future research directions include:

- Neuroimaging studies of practitioners engaged in energy cultivation practices
- Longitudinal studies tracking the effects of systematic tantric practice
- Investigation of the relationship between traditional energy concepts and measurable physiological parameters
- Research into the therapeutic applications of specific tantric techniques

8.2 Educational and Training Applications

The development of comprehensive training programs that honor the sacred aspects of tantric practice while meeting contemporary educational standards represents an important opportunity. This includes:

- Integration of traditional knowledge with modern pedagogical approaches
- Development of certification programs for tantric Hatha Yoga instruction
- Creation of educational materials that preserve the depth and authenticity of traditional teachings

8.3 Therapeutic Integration

The careful integration of tantric elements into therapeutic contexts offers significant potential for enhancing treatment outcomes. Areas of application include:

- Trauma-informed yoga therapy incorporating energy awareness practices
- Integration of chakra and energy concepts into holistic health approaches
- Development of mindfulness-based interventions that include tantric elements
- Application of tantric principles to couples therapy and relationship counseling

9. Ethical Considerations and Responsibilities

9.1 Teacher Preparation and Qualification

The transmission of tantric elements within Hatha Yoga requires teachers who possess both technical knowledge and spiritual maturity. This includes:

- Deep personal practice and understanding of tantric principles
- Proper training in the sacred aspects of these practices
- Ethical guidelines for working with students in transformative practices
- Ongoing education and spiritual development

9.2 Student Preparation and Consent

Students engaging with tantric elements in Hatha Yoga should be properly prepared and informed about the nature and potential effects of these practices. This includes:

- Clear explanation of the spiritual and energetic dimensions of practice
- Informed consent regarding the powerful nature of advanced techniques
- Appropriate screening for readiness and suitability
- Ongoing support and guidance throughout the transformative process

9.3 Cultural Sensitivity and Respect

The preservation of the sacred nature of tantric tradition while making these practices accessible requires ongoing attention to cultural sensitivity and respect. This includes:

- Acknowledgment of the Indian origins and cultural context of these practices
- Avoidance of superficial or commercialized presentations
- Support for traditional teachers and institutions
- Contribution to the preservation and authentic transmission of these teachings

10. Implications for Practice and Teaching

10.1 Authentic Transmission

The effective transmission of tantric elements within Hatha Yoga requires an approach that honors both the technical precision and spiritual depth of these practices. This includes:

- Understanding the energetic and consciousness-based goals of specific techniques
- Maintaining appropriate attitude and intention during practice and instruction
- Creating sacred space that supports transformative work
- Balancing accessibility with depth and authenticity

10.2 Progressive Development

The systematic development of students in tantric Hatha Yoga follows traditional principles of gradual preparation and progressive advancement. This includes:

- Establishing proper foundation through basic practices
- Developing energy sensitivity and awareness
- Gradual introduction of more advanced techniques
- Integration of physical, energetic, and consciousness-based elements

10.3 Holistic Integration

The ultimate goal of tantric Hatha Yoga—the integration of all aspects of human experience—requires an approach that addresses physical, energetic, psychological, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously. This includes:

- Understanding the interconnectedness of different practice elements
- Supporting students in integrating practice insights into daily life
- Facilitating the development of wisdom and compassion alongside technical skill
- Encouraging the emergence of authentic spiritual maturity

11. Conclusion

The tantric elements within Hatha Yoga represent a sophisticated and profound approach to human transformation that integrates physical practice with energy cultivation and consciousness development. Understanding these elements is essential for practitioners and teachers who wish to engage with the deeper transformative potential of yoga while maintaining respect for its sacred origins.

The research presented in this paper demonstrates that Hatha yoga IS a tantric practice, hatha yoga is, at its heart, focussed on the refinement and activation of 'prana' or life force. This understanding transforms our approach to practice from mere physical exercise to

comprehensive spiritual technology designed to awaken dormant potentials within the human system.

Contemporary scientific investigation is beginning to validate traditional claims regarding the transformative effects of these practices, providing a bridge between ancient wisdom and modern understanding. However, this integration must be approached with appropriate respect for the sacred nature of tantric tradition and careful attention to the safety and proper preparation of practitioners.

The challenges of cultural appropriation, commercialization, and superficial interpretation require ongoing vigilance from the yoga community. The preservation of authentic transmission while making these practices accessible to contemporary practitioners demands both technical knowledge and spiritual maturity from teachers and sincere commitment from students.

Future developments in this field will likely focus on continued scientific investigation of the mechanisms underlying tantric practices, the development of comprehensive training programs that honor traditional wisdom while meeting contemporary educational standards, and the careful integration of these approaches into therapeutic and wellness contexts.

The ultimate significance of understanding tantric elements in Hatha Yoga lies not merely in historical or academic interest, but in the potential for these practices to facilitate genuine transformation in contemporary practitioners. As our world faces increasing challenges related to stress, disconnection, and spiritual emptiness, the sophisticated technologies of tantric Hatha Yoga offer valuable resources for individual and collective healing.

The journey of understanding and integrating these practices requires humility, respect, and commitment to authentic spiritual development. When approached with proper preparation and guidance, the tantric elements within Hatha Yoga continue to offer their transformative potential to sincere practitioners, serving as a bridge between the material and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

As we move forward in our exploration and application of these ancient teachings, we carry the responsibility of preserving their essential wisdom while adapting their expression to meet the needs of contemporary seekers. This balance between tradition and innovation,

between preservation and evolution, represents the ongoing challenge and opportunity of working with the tantric elements that lie at the heart of authentic Hatha Yoga practice.

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